THE POINT OF THE SOUTHERN BAPTISTS' DEPARTURE FROM THE DOCTRINES OF CALVINISM

By

Jim Maples

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Approved:

Thesis Advisor: _____
Dr. Miles Van Pelt

RTS/Virtual President: _____
Andrew J. Peterson, Ph.D.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

When one hears well-known, respected Southern Baptist preachers, leaders of the denomination, proclaim from the pulpit that Jesus Christ paid for every sin of every human being on the cross, except the sin of unbelief, (an idea that Richard Pratt calls heresy[1]) when human responsibility is the final cause of salvation, when man determines the question of his salvation, one has to question the source of these doctrines. Some might say the case is overstated but one need only to look to the words of Herschel Hobbs ("Mr. Baptist"[2]): "The devil and God held an election to determine whether or not you would be saved or lost. The devil voted against you and God voted for you. So the vote was a tie. It is up to you to cast the deciding vote."[3] Or consider the words of conservative Southern Baptist pastor, Nelson Price, in a sermon at the annual meeting of the Georgia Baptist Convention: "People are not lost because they are not elected but because by them Christ has been rejected."[4] Tom Nettles sums this up: "The efficacy of the Father's election therefore hangs on human will in time."[5] One has to ask what brought about the doctrines these statements represent when Southern Baptists of an

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[1] Richard Pratt, "Introduction to Theological Studies," *Reformed Theological Seminary-Virtual*, 2003, sound cassette.
[2] Paul Basden, ed., *Has Our Theology Changed? Southern Baptist Thought since 1845* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1994), 59.
[3] Herschel Hobbs, "God's Election Day," sermon preached on *The Baptist Hour*, 8 October 1967, Beam International, 18, No. 5, 23-24.
[4] Thomas J. Nettles, "Ready for Reformation*?" Founders Journal* 44 (Spring 2001): 4.
[5] Ibid.

earlier era, like B.H. Carroll (founder and first president of Southwestern Seminary) said, "repentance and faith proceed from election, and not election from them."[6] There were others like P. H. Mell (one of the original delegates who founded the Southern Baptist Convention and one who held more official positions in Baptist life at every level than any other in Southern Baptist history[7]) for whom a "strict Calvinistic interpretation of predestination was logically compelling."[8] Or J. L. Dagg (the first writing Baptist theologian in America[9]) who wrote, "with this universal call to absolute and unconditional surrender to God's sovereignty, the doctrine of particular redemption exactly harmonizes."[10] Dagg in criticizing words of his time similar to those expressed by Hobbs wrote, "We carve out to ourselves a deity more amiable . . . We aim to free him from the responsibility of determining who shall be saved; and we form the plan, and fix the terms of salvation, with the design of rendering the result contingent on the actions of men."[11] Charles D. Mallary (founding trustee of Mercer University) in a sermon on Ephesians 1:3-4 said, "God's free, sovereign, eternal and unchangeable purpose [is] to glorify the perfections of his character in the salvation of a definite number of the human family by Jesus Christ, without regard to any foreseen merit or good works on their part, as the ground or condition of this choice . . ." Mallary represented mainstream Baptist thinking in his day.[12]

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[6] B. H. Carroll, *An Interpretation of the English Bible: The Pastoral Epistles of Paul, 1 and 2 Peter, Jude, and 1, 2, and 3 John* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1947), 189.
[7] P. H. Mell, Jr., *Life of Patrick Hues Mell* (Louisville: Baptist Book Concern, 1895), 151.
[8] Basden, 43.
[9] Ibid., 45.
[10] J. L. Dagg, *Manual of Theology* (Charleston: Southern Baptist Publication Society, 1857), 331.
[11] Ibid., 226.
[12] Mark Coppenger, "The Ascent of Lost Man in Southern Baptist Preaching," *Founders Journal* 25 (Summer 1996): 6-7.

If these views were mainstream Southern Baptist views, how did they arrive at the point in the stream represented by the comments of Hobbs, Price, and other key figures in Southern Baptist life today? Was there a church council, a convention wherein delegates voted to amend long-standing doctrinal beliefs? There was no such definitive action so where and how did such systems of belief arise?

If there was no action by the church, how and when did these changes occur? Some like Tom Nettles would respond by saying that "the factors involved in such a phenomenon are so complex that a thoroughly accurate analysis is not possible."[13] Others would insist that no change has taken place, that the statements of Hobbs, et. al., above represent historic Christianity and are sound doctrinal positions long held by not only Southern Baptists but their Baptist forerunners.

The examples given above are only representative and do not mean to limit the scope of the inquiry into the change, or lack thereof, of Southern Baptist doctrine. For example, the election example used above by one of the most respected Baptist teachers and preachers for decades begs the question of the sovereignty of God. Though Herschel Hobbs would assert that God is sovereign his desire to express man's responsibility in salvation produces an example wherein God's vote is of no more value than Satan's and the vote of the tie-breaker, man himself, is on an equal footing also – an assertion that leaves man and not God sovereign.

Much has been written over the last several decades relative to the positions of various historical Southern Baptist theologians, preachers, seminary presidents, and professors. A number of streams have been traced to reputable and theologically sound

[13] Thomas J. Nettles, *By His Grace and for His Glory: A Historical, Theological, and Practical Study of the Doctrines of Grace in Baptist Life* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1986), 244.

sources, but no single issue has dominated the discussions. This has led to the confusing complexity of which Nettles refers. Each stream, and there are a variety of streams flowing within Southern Baptist life today, wants to trace its doctrine to historic figures and insist that no change has taken place in their particular theology, but rather that it represents historic Christianity. Some pick one figure(s) some another. Some trace their origins back to John "the Baptist."

This is not necessarily a bad thing. As David Wells says, "reflection must range over the past, seeking to gather from God's working in the Church the ballast that will steady it in the storms of the present . . . reflection must seek to understand the connections between what is confessed and what, in any given society, is taken as normative. This is crucial."[14] The scope of this inquiry is not the Church but Southern Baptist heritage. What ballast did the Southern Baptists gather from their heritage and is it steadying the ship in the present storms? As John Hannah said, "Both history and theology are indispensable to the vitality of the church."[15] What is the history of Southern Baptists and what was their theology at critical junctures along that timeline, i.e., from where did different streams emerge and, perhaps more importantly, why did these various streams emerge?

When P. H. Mell is said to have a "strict Calvinistic interpretation," Calvinistic is taken to mean that stream of historic Christianity flowing out of the Reformation. This is in itself a rather broad stream for the parameters of this paper so the doctrines of Calvinism will be defined as that formulation of the response to the Arminian

[14] David F. Wells, *No Place for Truth, or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1993), 100.
[15] John Hannah, "The Denigration of Theology in the Postmodern World," *Reformation and Revival* 11:1 (Winter 2002): 14.

remonstrants contained in the articles of the Synod of Dort. This by no means represents the breadth and depth of Calvinism but the issues that are in view here, as some examples above show, are the same issues addressed at Dort. It is also convenient, and perhaps no accident that most Baptists trace their beginnings to John Smyth and his group of thirty-seven that left England and settled in Amsterdam in 1608 at the very time that James Arminius was pastor of the most celebrated church in Amsterdam and causing quite a stir among the Reformed churches there.[16] Fisher Humphreys writes of these early Baptists that "three issues – believer's baptism, Baptist sectarianism, and religious freedom – [put] the first Baptists . . . in conflict with groups outside themselves, so that we might say that their theology was apologetic in character and much of their energy in the 17th century was devoted to defending these three ideas. Initially, they were in conflict with outsiders concerning Calvinism as well, but in about a quarter of a century this great matter became one of polemics rather than apologetics, that is, an intra-Baptist matter."[17] No investigation of "Baptist theology" prior to the 17th century will be undertaken other than to point out some views held by those who trace Baptist heritage back to New Testament times.

If Humphreys had included evangelism and pragmatism, he would have covered the key factors that shape Southern Baptist theology as well. An apologetic theology, a theology to support areas wherein they felt themselves to be under attack could be said to be the overwhelming influence in forming divergent streams of doctrine not only in the seventeenth century but from 1845 to the present.

[16] *The Articles of the Synod of Dort*, trans. Thomas Scott (Harrisonburg: Sprinkle Publications, 1993), 21.
[17] Fisher Humphreys, "Baptists and Their Theology," *Baptist History and Heritage* 35 (Winter 2000): 11.

One thing that makes it difficult to trace Southern Baptist doctrine is the lack of formal systematic doctrines. Much of what is offered as evidence of theological positions comes from sermons, a limited number of confessions, articles, books, and materials written for instruction in seminaries. Some of this was due to the factors Humphreys described and some from an aversion to confessional statements. This is problematic for as Wells added, "once confession is lost, reflection is cut loose to find new pastures."[18] This, combined with the Southern Baptist view of ecclesiology and the competency of the individual believer, produces a mixture that is often very hard to define and provides an easy answer to critics. Throughout their history it has been possible to find Southern Baptists diametrically opposed on critical issues. For example Walter Draughon says, "From their Calvinistic beginnings to the present . . . Southern Baptists have consistently altered their approach to Christ's saving work on the cross."[19] Why is this the case and how do these changes occur?

The point (purpose) of the Southern Baptist departure from the doctrines of Calvinism is bound up in their evangelism, ecclesiology, views of religious freedom, and associated distinctives. This did not happen just with the early Baptists but has shaped Southern Baptist life over the last one hundred fifty years. The point of their departure has served a pragmatic end but it is this purpose that has been the "point" (origin) of their departure and not the confusing mix of theological positions put forth over the last century and one-half. The purpose is the point of departure. When Calvinism, as defined above for the purposes of this inquiry, clashes with Southern Baptist distinctives and purposes, the vast majority of Southern Baptists have found it expedient, for pragmatic

[18] Wells, 101.
[19] Basden, 73.

reasons, to move away from these doctrines. It is the purpose herein to examine this proposal.

CHAPTER 2

HISTORY OF THE SOUTHERN BAPTISTS

The history of the Southern Baptists is an area representing different traditions. Most historians hold to the view that Southern Baptists came into being in 1845. The origin of Baptists in general, however, stems from John Smyth and the separatists who left England with him and settled for several years in Holland. There are some, however, who insist on an unbroken stream of tradition from John the Baptist forward.

Southern Baptist Origins

"On May 18, 1814 thirty-three delegates from Baptist churches in North and South met in Philadelphia to form *The General Missionary Convention of the Baptist Denomination in the United States for Foreign Missions*."[20] This convention was to meet every three years so it became known as the "*Triennial Convention*."[21] The convention's purpose was to raise funds and send out missionaries. The first missionaries sent out "were Luther Rice and Adoniram Judson."[22]

In the years that followed disagreements between the northern Baptists and the southern Baptists began to escalate – primarily over the issue of slavery. The southern Baptists embraced and defended slavery biblically because it was the heart of their

[20]Steve Cowan, "A Sketch of Southern Baptist History" (Fayetteville: Immanuel Baptist Church, pamphlet, 2000), 2.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Ibid.

economic system and to a lesser degree their social system and way of life. The northern Baptists were very vocal about the fact that God would never show favoritism to one race over another. "Around 1835, the southern states began complaining that they weren't receiving money for mission work."[23] This reached a head in 1844 when the "Home Mission Society gave a statement saying that a person could not be a missionary and wish to keep his slaves as property."[24] The upshot of this was a meeting of southern Baptists in Augusta, Georgia in 1845 the result of which was the formation of the Southern Baptist Convention. At this time the *International Mission Board* and the *North American Mission Board* were established. After the Civil War and Reconstruction the Southern Baptists began to flourish. "In 1894 the Northern and Southern Baptists agreed to a territorial arrangement that established the states of the south as exclusive territory for the Southern Baptist Convention."[25] From this time until the end of World War I, the Southern Baptists extended their reach around the world, first breaking out of the territorial divisions noted and eventually entering the twentieth century as a denomination influencing many people across America and throughout the world. They had become a large denomination with a large number of churches and members sharing a culture and programs, but far from united in their theological beliefs.

Historical Roots

Most, but not all, Baptists trace their roots to John Smyth and his group of Separatists who, enduring persecution by King James I, left England and settled in Amsterdam. It was there that Smyth was "acquainted, possibly for the first time, with the

[23]Richard Moore, "Southern Baptists," (Unpublished essay, University of Virginia, 2000), 2.
[24] Ibid., 3.
[25] Ibid.

theology of [James] Arminius."[26] Amsterdam was not particularly receptive to Smyth's views on baptism so he found among the Anabaptists (Mennonites) a compatible theology. It is probably from the Mennonites that Smyth developed his doctrine of the nature of the church. Smyth later joined with the Mennonites and around 1611 Thomas Helwys and some ten members of the original group of thirty-seven returned to England.[27] There they founded a church modeled on the Arminian theology they had absorbed in Amsterdam. Such churches "came later to be called General Baptists because they held to a general atonement of all men."[28] By 1626 there were five such churches in England and by 1644 they had grown to forty-seven.[29]

Another group of Separatists who later became convinced to reject infant baptism and accept only believer's baptism but who still held to a particular theory of the atonement came to be known as Particular Baptists. They were Calvinistic in their beliefs. These two groups began to grow throughout England. "By 1644 the number of Particular Baptist churches had increased to seven. In that year these seven churches united in issuing a confession of faith . . . which is one of the chief landmarks of Baptist history." This bore the title "A Confession of Faith of Seven Congregations or Churches of Christ in London, which are commonly (but unjustly) called Anabaptists."[30]

American Baptists trace their origins chiefly, but again not exclusively, to Roger Williams the founder of Rhode Island. Williams was an "arch-individualist and an

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[26] Henry C. Vedder, *Short History of the Baptists* (Philadelphia: The American Baptist Publication Society, 1946), 202.
[27] Ibid., 204-205
[28] Ibid., 205.
[29] Ibid.
[30] Philip Schaff, ed., *The Creeds of Christendom with a History and Critical Notes*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1993), 3:854.

advocate of 'soul-liberty' in the widest acceptation of the term."[31] Williams was originally a member of the Salem church in Massachusetts but his views put him squarely in opposition to the church and "in fact his rebaptism brought upon him the sentence of excommunication"[32] from that body. In 1636 he founded the town of Providence and in 1638 became a Baptist. "He was immersed by Ezekiel Hollyman and in turn immersed Hollyman and ten others. This was the first Baptist church on the American continent."[33] It is interesting that "Cotton Mather compared him to a windmill, which, by its rapid motion in consequence of a violent storm, became so intensely agitated that it took fire and endangered the whole town."[34]

Iain Murray tells us that Baptist churches did not exactly flourish after this time. Only seventeen Baptist churches were formed in the first hundred years after America was settled.[35] "The advance came in the eighteenth century when Baptist churches spread widely from two main starting-points: from 'the Welsh tract' near Philadelphia, and from New England, where their first prominent leader was Isaac Backus (1724-1806) who traveled over 67,000 miles from his church base at Middleborough, Massachusetts."[36] The Baptists were one of the biggest beneficiaries of the Second Great Awakening and Murray says "nothing else can explain the great numerical growth which their churches experienced."[37]

As the country expanded and the churches along with it, the Baptists expanded west and south. Thomas Halbrooks characterizes the Western Root as "fiercely

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[31] Ibid., 849.
[32] Ibid., 851.
[33] Ibid.
[34] Ibid., 849.
[35] Iain Murray, *Revival and Revivalism, The Making and Marring of American Evangelicalism 1750-1858* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2002), 302.
[36] Ibid.
[37] Ibid.

independent and sectarian. Baptists . . . denied the common denominator of Christian churches [and] in competition with other churches . . . claimed to be the only true church."[38] Halbrooks said the Southern Root was a product of southern culture and its hallmarks were "Biblicism, racism, and provincialism."[39] The similarities between these different "Roots" made their union almost a foregone conclusion. "With the dominance in Southern Baptist life of the Southern and Western Roots independence, sectarianism, and competitiveness were a natural outgrowth."[40]

Creedal Statements

Virtually all Baptists would reject the idea of any particular creed being enforced as a doctrinal standard. Historically, Baptists have had an aversion to creeds. Baptists are not creedal people. W. M. S. West has written that there is a fear of creeds among Baptists "that they will become forced upon Baptists as tests of orthodoxy." This is coupled with a "continuing fear that they should in some way be thought to be of equal authority with the scriptures."[41] This aversion also draws sustenance from 1.) the liberty of the individual conscience, 2.) the competency of the individual and the particular church to make their own interpretation of Scripture. The problem is that, as John Frame said, "once you put the Bible in your own words, and it is immaterial whether those words are spoken or written you have a creed."[42] On that basis, with a view to the

[38] G. Thomas Halbrooks, "The Roots of Southern Baptist Relationships with Other Denominations," *Baptist History and Heritage* 25:3 (July 1990): 12.
[39] Ibid.
[40] Ibid.
[41] W. M. S. West, "Foundation Documents of the Faith: VIII Baptists and Statements of Faith," *Expository Times* 91:8 (May 1980): 232.
[42] John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1987), 305.

driving force behind Baptist creeds, or lack thereof, the following creedal statements are of note.

The confession written by John Smyth, our earliest Baptist contains definite Arminian, even Pelagian, theology, particularly with regard to original sin. "Original sin is an idle term, and that there is no such thing as men intend by the word because God threatened death only to Adam not to his posterity."[43] Further to this he writes, "That infants are conceived and born in innocency without sin, and that so dying are undoubtedly saved, and that this is to be understood of all infants under Heaven."[44]

The Particular Baptists produced their own confession in 1644 in what has come to be known as *The First London Confession*. As West wrote,

> The motives behind the publication of the 1644 Confession are stated . . . in [the] preface. They claimed that they had been unjustly charged . . . of denying certain doctrines and of holding certain others. They were accused of . . . believing in free-will and of denying original sin . . . the leaders of the congregations decided to publish this confession to establish their Calvinistic orthodoxy. They made it clear also that the Confession was signed by the representatives of seven congregations, thus making it clear it was not the judgment of one congregation on its own.[45]

A *Second London Confession of Particular Baptists* was issued in 1677 and that confession "follows very closely the Westminster Confession, and is concerned, like so many of the confessions . . . to ensure that the readers recognize how the Baptists stand firmly and squarely with the Presbyterians and others in their general beliefs, departing only on the issue of baptism."[46] Thus as early as 1644 it is clear some Baptists were very Calvinistic. The term Baptist, however, could have little meaning theologically among different groups other than a denial of pedobaptism.

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[43] William L. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1969), 117.
[44] Ibid.
[45] West, 229.
[46] Ibid.

In the *Abstract of Principles* contained in the original charter of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in 1858 we find the following statement concerning Adam's posterity: "his posterity inherit a nature corrupt and wholly opposed to God and His law." The 1925 *Baptist Faith and Message* says, "his posterity inherit a nature corrupt and in bondage to sin." By the time of the 1963 revision of *The Baptist Faith and Message* we find that "his posterity inherit a nature and an environment inclined toward sin." The 2000 revision repeats the words of the 1963 version.[47] Of course, one has to question the whole exercise when the preamble to the 2000 version reads, "Baptists cherish and defend religious liberty, and deny the right of any secular or religious authority to impose a confession of faith upon a church or body of churches. We honor the principles of soul competency and the priesthood of believers . . ."[48]

With regard to this same question of the Fall of Man as contained in the 1858 *Abstract of Principles* an online survey done by the Founder's Movement revealed that twenty-four percent of respondents said the 1858 formulation was either not taught, taught against, or they were unsure whether it was taught.[49] A similar survey done by the author with a local Southern Baptist association revealed that one hundred percent of the respondents said they taught the doctrine as presented in the 1858 Abstract, but twenty-five percent of those respondents were not sure that this doctrine was taught in most Southern Baptist churches.

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[47] Southern Baptist Convention, "Comparison of 1925, 1963 and 2000 Baptist Faith and Message," report to SBC convention, Adrian Rogers, chmn., Nashville: SBC, 2000, 1.
[48] Ibid.
[49] Founders Ministries, "Are Most SBC Churches Faithful to Their Heritage?" online survey, available from http://www.founders.org/misc/suryshow.pl. Internet; accessed 14 November 2003.

From all this it is clear that there are at least two streams, historically, within Southern Baptist thinking, 1.) one which insists on the primacy of Scripture and rejects creedal statements as unnecessary, 2.) another that sees a need for creedal statements as a proper interpretation of Scripture. The former group, asserting the competency of every believer and church, is as Wells said, "cut loose to find new pastures." The latter, a minority among Southern Baptists, struggles to have confessions of faith that are a proper interpretation of biblical authority. Alexander Campbell, founder of the Cambellite movement, had a slogan, "No creed but the Bible." George says, "Campbell's slogan . . . has become a shibboleth of Baptist identity among the denominational descendants of those who stoutly opposed it in Campbell's day."[50] It is clear, even from the limited survey above, that there was not a stream of doctrine, historically, from which certain other streams diverged but rather a great number of individual streams of vastly different character all claiming to flow from the same source: the Scriptures and the practices of the New Testament church.

State of the Current Debate

The theological differences of the Baptists and Southern Baptists in particular have been an issue since their inception. Smyth, Helwys, and company, the General Baptists were theologically on a different plane than their Particular Baptist cousins in England. Later, "Some eighteenth century Baptists accepted the view that a genuine commitment to Calvinism entailed a refusal to evangelize," and Humphreys rightly points out, "the transcending of that view was indispensable to the health of Baptists. The

[50] Timothy George, "Southern Baptist Ghosts," *First Things* 93 (May 1999): 22.

struggle between these two points of view was conducted by followers of [John] Gill and followers of Andrew Fuller."[51]

Early Southern Baptists like J. L. Dagg, J. P. Boyce, Basil Manly, and B. H. Carroll "wrote under the heavy influence of the old Princeton Seminary orthodoxy."[52] This distinguished them from E. Y. Mullins, W. T. Conner, and Dale Moody.[53] Boyce's views were so decidedly old school that he referred to the Westminster Confession of Faith as "our confession."[54] "In 1856 he complained that 'the distinctive principles of Arminianism have also been engrafted upon many of our churches' and that 'some of our ministry have not hesitated publicly to avow them.' Among those sharing Boyce's concern was Patrick Hues Mell."[55]

As recently as June, 2006 a debate between Albert Mohler, president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and Paige Patterson, president of Southwestern Theological Seminary was one of the highlights of the most recent Southern Baptist Convention. Patterson said he was neither an Arminian nor a Calvinist and affirmed some views from both sides. For example: "I believe that salvation is by grace alone, and I'm not a Calvinist," "men must decide whether they will respond to the calling or not," "God is sovereign enough that He can make a man totally free if He wishes to do so," "election [is] through the foreknowledge of God," "he sees no biblical evidence for irresistible grace," he objects to "the compassionlessness for a lost world seen in some

[51] Fisher Humphreys, "Baptists and Their Theology," *Baptist History and Heritage* 35 (Winter 2000): 12.
[52] Paul Basden, ed., *Has Our Theology Changed? Southern Baptist Thought since 1845* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1994), 39.
[53] Ibid.
[54] Murray, 324.
[55] Ibid., 325.

Calvinists," and the "antinomian tendencies present in some Calvinists particularly on the subject of drinking alcohol."[56]

Mohler, who affirms the five points of Calvinism represented by the Dortian formulation, replied: "human will is not contravened by God," "all Southern Baptists must believe in a form of limited atonement otherwise they would be universalists," "I believe before the creation of the world God determined to save sinners and not just in a general sense," and "the Lord's will, as the initiating will, wills the human will to will what the Father wills."[57]

There has been some ebb and flow to the debate over the years but there remains little difference between the General and Particular Baptists of the seventeenth century and the current state of debate, which Mohler and Patterson classified as "honest disagreements." How is it that those who hold all five points of the Dortian formulation, those who hold to three or four points, and those who like Dale Moody hold none are all called Southern Baptists? Wiley Richards says that it was "the doctrinal strength of the Particular Baptists [that] helped form the theological personality of Baptists."[58] Roger Nicole agrees, "It is to the Particular Baptists that the overwhelming majority of Baptists in the United States were historically related."[59] Boyce, Dagg, Carroll, and Manly, key figures in the formation of the Southern Baptist Convention, all professed and taught Calvinism. With that heritage why did "the strength of Calvinism [continue] to decline between 1845 and 1900."[60] Timothy George adds, "The history of Baptist movement in

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[56] "Views of Election – Mohler/Patterson," SBC Tapes, 2006, Sound cassette.
[57] Ibid.
[58] W. Wiley Richards, *Winds of Doctrine* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1991), 12.
[59] Tom J. Nettles and Russell D. Moore, eds., *Why I Am a Baptist* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2001), 228.
[60] Richards, 85.

the 20th century could be largely written as the story of the erosion of that theological consensus which obtained in most places until the Fundamentalist-Modernist disputes."[61] Or as Tom Nettles said, "Any casual observer of the contemporary Southern Baptist scene can readily observe that the Doctrines of Grace no longer hold sway over the majority of Southern Baptist people, or even a significant minority of them."[62]

If it is not theology that makes one a Southern Baptist what is it? If the historic roots and founders of the Southern Baptist Convention were Calvinistic what was the point (purpose) in departing from that position? In the next chapter a number of these purposes will be examined.

[61] Timothy George, "Southern Baptist Theology, Whence and Whither?" *Founders Journal* 19/20 (Winter/Spring 1995): 24.
[62] Thomas J. Nettles, *By His Grace and for His Glory: A Historical, Theological, and Practical Study of the Doctrines of Grace in Baptist Life* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1986), 244.

CHAPTER 3

THEOLOGY SHAPED BY PURPOSE

Baptist history and Southern Baptist history in particular reflect a record of various emphases and certain distinctives that arose from or were justified by certain theological deviations from Calvinism. Some of the more important and far reaching distinctives are detailed below.

Early Influences

The first Baptists were Arminian in their theology and were aware that this, like their refusal to practice covenant baptism, set them apart from the vast majority of the Protestant church. Smyth and Helwys "became convinced that the church should be composed only of adult believers who received baptism on the basis of their personal declaration of faith. Thus infant baptism, retained by most of the English separatists, was unacceptable in the true church."[63] It is interesting that Smyth also became convinced of a number of other things. One has to assume that his conviction(s) arose from Scripture but he "was a purist who believed that no printed books, hymns, prayers or sermons should be used in worship. Genuine worship was completely spontaneous, from the heart, no human creation. He even refused to allow reading from scripture in worship

[63] Bill J. Leonard, *Word of God Across the Ages: Using Christian History in Preaching* (Greeneville: Smyth and Helwys Publishing, 1991), 88.

since English translations were a corruption of the true word of God."[64] As noted above some of Smyth's other conclusions from Scripture also denied the doctrine of original sin.

Other groups of Separatist Puritan churches in London became convinced of the appropriateness of adult-only believer's baptism. But, unlike Smyth and Helwys they remained true to their Calvinistic heritage. Thus at the earliest stages of Baptist life we see a unity in their doctrine of baptism but a great diversity in other doctrines, particularly in the Reformed doctrines of grace. This theologically diverse group became Baptists; their overriding, unifying theology a distinctive doctrine of baptism.

In spite of this diversity, as Baptists moved into the American colonies, the overwhelming majority were Calvinists. "Roger Williams was a decided Calvinist."[65] John Clarke, the founder of the second Baptist church in America "begins his personal confession of faith by showing his unity with the Puritans and Pilgrims of Massachusetts . . . A part of this decree consists of the unconditional election of certain individuals to salvation."[66] As the Baptists moved south and on to the frontier notable pastors and theologians like P. H. Mell, B. H. Carroll, J. L. Dagg, Richard Furman, president of the Triennial Convention and founder and president of the South Carolina Baptist Convention, Basil Manly, president of the University of Alabama who followed Furman as pastor of First Baptist Church of Charleston, J.P. Boyce, founder of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Jesse Mercer, clerk of Georgia Baptist Association for twenty-one years, president of the Georgia Baptist Convention for nineteen years, and C.D.

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[64] Ibid.
[65] Thomas J. Nettles, "The Rise & Demise of Calvinism Among Southern Baptists," *Founders Journal* 19/20 (Winter/Spring 1995): 6.
[66] Ibid.

Mallary, early pastor and missionary in Georgia and trustee of Mercer University led the denomination. They are described by contemporary scholars like Tom Nettles, Fisher Humphreys, and Timothy George as Calvinists.

Revivalism

As stated above, the Baptists were one of the major beneficiaries of the Second Great Awakening. The promotion of personal religious experience, the altar call, the anxious seat, and the mourner's bench were just some of the techniques designed to elicit a response in the revival meetings, which spread across the western and southern frontier. The results of these frontier revivals were impressive and the claims rested on the new methods as well as what some call a reaction to the hyper-Calvinistic anti-missionary movements of the eighteenth century.[67] Charles G. Finney was one of the leading proponents and perfecters of revival techniques. "Finney's legacy shaped the theology and methodology of evangelism generally and Southern Baptist evangelism particularly."[68] Finney shifted the emphasis away from God and focused on the human response in salvation. Iain Murray wrote, "Finney knew that for most of his hearers a major obstacle to accepting this simple account of conversion was what they had been taught about the character of man's fallen nature. If men needed only the inducement of motives in order to effect a change of nature how was the doctrine of human depravity to be understood?"[69]

> Michael Horton has accurately summarized Finney's beliefs: "God is not sovereign, man is not a sinner by nature; the atonement is not a true payment for sin, justification by imputation is insulting to reason

[67] Timothy George, Dean of Beeson Divinity School, Telephone interview, 8 July 2006.
[68] Rick Nelson, "How Does Doctrine Affect Evangelism? The Divergent Paths of Asahel Nettleton and Charles Finney," *Founders Journal* 33 (Summer 1998): 5.
[69] Iain Murray, *Revival and Revivalism, The Making and Marring of American Evangelicalism 1750-1858* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2002), 244.

> and morality, the new birth is simply the effect of successful techniques, and revival is a natural result of clever campaigns."[70]

"The revivalist gravitates almost inevitably toward the idea that 'whosoever will may come.'"[71] (One of the respondents to the survey of Southern Baptist pastors conducted by the author actually added that very comment as a footnote under the question on election, which he said was not taught in Scripture.) The reaction against the errors in the "techniques" of Finney and others is not relegated to hindsight. B.B. Warfield warned, "A very large proportion of those swept into the churches by the excitement of the revival were not really converted."[72] Francis Wayland, president of Brown University, and J. W. Alexander "observed a general weakening in doctrine and spirituality; Wayland noted, in particular, 'the tendency to treat lightly and seldom the doctrine of depravity, and to generalize the atonement of Christ."[73] The errors from this period still haunt Southern Baptist practice today. The Baptist churches experienced widespread change in the early to mid-nineteenth century. The question about this period is whether or not this was a corrective to an earlier anti-missionary, anti-evangelistic, hyper-Calvinistic theology or was it a departure from Calvinistic orthodoxy held by the majority of Baptists and particularly by their leading figures and theologians? Murray says that the evidence clearly points to the fact that it was a "descent from orthodoxy to Arminianism."[74] Even Humphreys adds, "Revivalism thus tends to lean theologically in an Arminian or even Pelagian direction with the implicit suggestion that people save

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[70] Nelson, 3.
[71] Fisher Humphreys, "Baptists and Their Theology," *Baptist History and Heritage* 35 (Winter 2000): 16.
[72] Nelson, 4.
[73] Murray, 323-324.
[74] Ibid.

themselves through choice. It is not only the case that beliefs shape practices, practices also shape beliefs."[75]

This very brief sketch of an important piece of Baptist history points out a very important fact. Rapid growth and immediate results led many to weaken or totally abandon orthodoxy. It was not as some claim a return to a more biblical position but rather a position justified by the ends. The course upon which this set Baptists and Southern Baptists in particular will be explored further.

Landmarkism

As Baptist churches began to grow on the southern and western frontier competition with other churches led many to deny any common ground with other Christian churches. Instead some Baptists began to claim that they were the only true church. W. Morgan Patterson writes, "Some Baptists observing certain doctrinal similarities in many of the sects of Christian history, claimed the antiquity of Baptists and caustically insinuated the illegitimacy of Protestant denominations which had sprung from the Roman Catholic church."[76] One of the chief protagonists of this view was J. R. Graves who took charge of "The Tennessee Baptist" in 1846 one year after the formation of the Southern Baptist Convention.

In Graves own words, he "soon commenced agitating the question of the validity of alien immersions and the propriety of Baptists recognizing, by any act . . . Paedobaptist societies or preachers as *churches* and ministers of Christ."[77] In 1851 at

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[75] Humphreys, 16.
[76] W. Morgan Patterson, "The Development of the Baptist Succesionist Formula," *Foundations* V: 4, (October 1962): 340.
[77] J.R. Graves, *Old Landmarkism: What is It?* (n.p., 1894; reprint, Nashville: Baptist Sunday School Committee, 1928), 14.

Cotton Grove, Tennessee, a convention of all Baptists willing to accept these teachings met and denied that other churches "ought . . . to be called gospel churches, or churches in a religious sense," that "ministers of such irregular and unscriptural bodies" were not to be recognized as gospel ministers, and that it would be inconsistent to "address [these] as brethren."[78]

The term Landmarkism arose because of an article written by J. M. Pendleton at the request of Graves which was entitled "Ought Baptists to recognize Paedobaptist Preachers as Gospel Ministers?" This was published as a tract under the name "An Old Landmark Reset" and had a large circulation in the South.[79] The critics of this position derisively called Graves, Pendleton, and their followers "Old Landmarkers." Patterson has summed up the conclusions of Graves.

> [He meant] Baptist churches could demonstrably be found in every age since New Testament times . . . They had borne such appellations as Donatists, Paulicians, Cathari, Waldenses . . . yet they were considered Baptists in their belief. Identity was made on the basis of certain mutual similarities [like the subjects and mode of baptism], while dissimilarities were completely ignored . . . Such an historical concatenation, the successionist historians felt, was the inevitable consequence of Matt. 16:18. In this matter they allowed a precarious interpretation of a Scripture verse to pronounce upon a strictly historical problem . . . since the perpetuity of [the local church] had been guaranteed by Jesus, there must have always been such groups in existence [and since Baptist Churches are the true church, they must have always existed] . . . The historian having accepted this hypothesis, had his task well delineated: to discover and correlate facts about Baptists which he believed <u>had to be there</u>.[80]

This kind of thinking reinforced tendencies of non-cooperation, isolation, and separatism that had begun in the Great Awakening. Thomas Halbrooks said, "Landmarkism had an impact among Southern Baptists far greater than that experienced

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[78] Ibid.
[79] Ibid.
[80] Patterson, 331. (Emphasis is in the original.)

in any other region."[81] Mark Coppenger says Graves was "an early dissident from the Reformed view of man." He quotes Graves, "The doctrine of eternal and unconditional election, and reprobation as taught by Calvin, and assented to by many professed Christians, we utterly repudiate . . . It is contrary to our reason as to our understanding of the Word of God."[82] The dominance of Landmarkism among Southern Baptists in the nineteenth century, Thomas Halbrooks says, virtually assured that when Southern Baptists later considered a confession of faith "they would turn to the New Hampshire Confession with its view of the church as local only and with no interest in cooperation with other denominations."[83] It is interesting that the New Hampshire Confession "presents the Calvinistic system in a milder form" than the Philadelphia which Schaff says is "simply the Baptist recension of the Westminster Confession."[84] The New Hampshire Confession provided the basis for the first Southern Baptist confession in 1925, The *Abstract of Principles*, which was revised into *The Baptist Faith and Message* in 1963. This document serves as the guideline for many churches' individual confessions of faith although as the survey results noted above show almost one quarter of Southern Baptist pastors doubt this is correct doctrine or is doctrine that is actually taught in Southern Baptist churches. The heart of the Landmark Baptists "ecclesiology was the insistence that only Baptist churches were the true churches of Christ since they

[81] G. Thomas Halbrooks, "The Roots of Southern Baptist Relationships with Other Denominations," *Baptist History and Heritage* 25:3 (July 1990): 12.
[82]Mark Coppenger, "The Ascent of Lost Man in Southern Baptist Preaching," *Founders Journal* 25 (Summer 1996): 9.
[83] Halbrooks, 11.
[84] Philip Schaff, ed., *The Creeds of Christendom with a History and Critical Notes*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1993), 3:855, 857.

could trace their lineage in unbroken succession from Jesus and his baptism by John (the Baptist) in River Jordan."[85]

While many modern day Southern Baptists like to discount the impact of Landmarkism it is still a prevalent idea among many Southern Baptists and sentiments like those stated above are regularly proclaimed from many pulpits.. Timothy George adds that "Landmarkism is still alive and well in the Baptist hinterland."[86] There is a strange appeal to this idea that keeps it alive even though virtually every trained historian has rejected this successionist formulation.

One of the curious things about this movement is a little book by J. M. Carroll entitled *The Trail of Blood*. The curious thing is that although it is a staunch defender of Landmarkism and a variety of other errors it still continues to sell at around 15,000 copies per year and over 2,380,000 copies have been distributed since its first printing in 1931. (Source: Ashland Avenue Baptist Church, Lexington, Ky.) A few examples will suffice. Carroll begins by calling attention to the "landmarks . . . of this religion – the Christian religion" and intends to trace it in an unbroken stream through twenty centuries.[87] Under marks of the true church down through the centuries he includes: "The churches in their government and discipline to be entirely separate and independent of each other, Jerusalem to have no authority over Antioch . . . And their government to be congregational, democratic. A government of the people, by the people, and for the people."[88] It seems that he has juxtaposed an eighteenth century idea of government with

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[85] Paul Basden, ed., *Has Our Theology Changed? Southern Baptist Thought since 1845* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1994), 169.
[86] Timothy George, "Southern Baptist Ghosts," *First Things* 93 (May 1999): 23.
[87] J. M. Carroll, *"The Trail of Blood": Following the Christians Down Through the Centuries . . ., or, The History of Baptist Churches from the Time of Christ, Their Founder, to the Present Day* (Lexington: Ashland Ave. Baptist Church, pamphlet, 1931), 6.
[88] Ibid., 8.

the New Testament pattern of church government. Another mark is "the inspired Scriptures, and they only, in fact, the New Testament and that only, to be the rule and guide of faith and life."[89]

Carroll's comments on Nicea and Chalcedon are revealing as well. Respectively, "a council was called in A.D. 313 [his date] . . . A Hierarchy was formed [in which] Christ was dethroned as head of the churches and Emperor Constantine enthroned."[90] "During the 5th Century, at the fourth Ecumenical Council . . . another entirely new doctrine was added . . . the doctrine called 'Mariolatry.'"[91] Over against this analysis of church history he adds that "fifty million died of persecution over the 1200 years of the Dark Ages as history seems positively to teach." Of those he attributes as being the true church (Baptists all in an unbroken string) are the Paulicians, Arnoldists, Henricians, Petro Brussians, Albigenses, Waldenses, and Anabaptists.[92] Graves and Pendleton with their Landmarkism capitalized on the competitive nature of Baptists that developed in the Second Great Awakening and grew on the southern and western frontier as Baptists expanded with the country. This fostered sectarianism, a denominational arrogance that isolated them from other churches, and fostered a kind of religious superiority over other denominations. All this was based on some rather faulty history and questionable interpretations of Scripture but history and interpretations none the less that promoted the view of Baptist churches that they had formulated. Many Southern Baptists today find these views as insipid as this cursory review has presented them.

[89] Ibid., 9.
[90] Ibid., 16.
[91] Ibid., 22-23.
[92] Ibid., 16.

However, this ecclesiology had an impact in shaping Southern Baptist ecclesiology and continues to do so in the hinterland.

Soul Competency and E.Y. Mullins

So it was in nineteenth century America that "Baptists developed an exaggerated view of the autonomy of the local church."[93] Another cry that arose during that time was in the words of Carroll, "Religious liberty for everyone." It would be some years before this doctrine was developed more fully and that development came under the leadership of E. Y. Mullins, president of Southern Seminary from 1899 to 1928. Although neither Mullins nor Carroll were the first to propound such. As has been said of Roger Williams, [he] became . . . an advocate of 'soul-liberty' in the widest acceptation of the term . . . His fame rests on his advocacy of the sacredness of conscience."[94] This doctrine which has become known as "soul competency" is a belief that the individual Christian is responsible and competent, presumably, to read, interpret, and apply the Scriptures in their life. This belief holds that no other authority can trump the competency of the individual.

Albert Mohler says that this "agenda was largely set by one man – Edgar Young Mullins."[95] Tom Nettles concurs and writes, "No one of trend-setting influence seriously challenged the Calvinistic hegemony before the arrival of E. Y. Mullins as president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in 1899."[96] This is true as far as influence

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[93] Norman H. Maring and Winthrop S. Hudson, *A Baptist Manual of Polity and Practice* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1963), 44.
[94] Schaff, 849, 851.
[95] R. Albert Mohler, Jr., "Dr. Mohler's Fidelitas," available from http://www.sbts.edu/mohler/FidelitasRead.php?article=fide1041; Internet; accessed 6 July 2006.
[96] Nettles, "The Rise and Demise of Calvinism," 17.

goes but it is clear from what we have seen above that the ground had been prepared in advance to receive the seeds Mullins was to sow.

Mohler says, "Mullins was profoundly influenced by Schleiermacher and Ritschl."[97] This personal, experiential view of meaning and truth was Mullins primary emphasis. Further to this point, Mohler said, "Mullins turned Southern Seminary and the Southern Baptist Convention off the course charted by the convention's and seminary's founders by making personal experience more important than biblical authority."[98] "Both Mullins and Herschel Hobbs . . . called the doctrine of soul competency the most distinctive belief of Baptists."[99] One would think that their doctrine of baptism or the authority of Scripture would claim that place but Mohler quoting Harold Bloom writes, "Mullins' doctrine of soul competency so focuses all meaning and truth in the autonomous individual – 'sanctioning endless interpretive possibilities' – that all religious authority is vaporized, even the authority of Scripture."[100]

Dwight Moody and Russell Dilday disagree with this assessment of Mullins and say that his critics simply do not understand him. Dilday: "He makes it very clear the Bible is the ultimate authority."[101] Given that Mullins served at Southern during the time of the Fundamentalist – Modernist controversy, he took a position and many of his statements clearly come down on the side of inerrancy. However, his extreme emphasis on personalism left him promoting a system that like his hero Schleiermacher ended up knowing only self and not God. Southern Baptist leader P. H. Mell wrote, "Christians

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[97] Mohler, 4.
[98] Mark Wingfield, ed., "Mohler Criticizes Mullins' Influence and Doctrine of Soul Competency," *Baptist Standard* (April 17, 2000): 4.
[99] Ibid.
[100] Mohler, 12.
[101] Wingfield, 5.

(sometimes unconsciously) not infrequently form in advance an idea in their minds – drawn from the teachings of others or from their own reflections – of the character of God and of the doctrines which he ought to promulgate and then afterwards consult the Bible to prove that their views are correct."[102] It is indeed the case that many Southern Baptists of this era who fought so hard for inerrancy diminished the teachings of Scripture because to them the autonomy of the local church and the individual were more important.

Mullins according to Bill Leonard, Baptist historian, was definitely leaning in this direction when he helped craft what has become to be known as the "Grand Compromise." As mentioned above the 1925 *Abstract of Principles* was a foundational document for the later *Baptist Faith and Message*, which serves as a guide for many Southern Baptist confessions in local churches. Leonard said that the "doctrines were articulated in such a way as to make room for congregations that represented a variety of diverse theological traditions. Each could believe that its way was the Baptist way."[103]

The legacy of Mullins and soul competency is described in various ways. It is true that much of what is taken to be a hallowed Baptist distinctive is not exactly what Mullins articulated and thus the debate continues about what Mullins believed. What is beyond debate, however, is the result of this issue of soul competency (or liberty as Roger Williams styled it). Maring and Hudson write, "Today this doctrine of liberty is often taken to mean that each individual is free to adopt whatever views he will without any restraints at all."[104] Tom Nettles adds, "The two generations of Mullins and his

[102] P. H. Mell, *Predestination and the Saints' Perseverance Stated and Defended* [c. 1849] (Cape Coral: Christian Gospel Foundation, n.d.), 24.
[103] Wingfield, 2.
[104] Maring and Hudson, 5.

successors succeeded not in perpetuating but in altering historic theological commitments of Baptists."[105] Sean Michael Lucas, director of Southern Seminary's Center for the Study of the Southern Baptist Convention comments on this issue, "For over seventy years Southern Baptists have harvested the shallow discipleship and vapid theology that resulted from sowing Mullins' theological seeds of experience."[106] Al Mohler quotes Hudson in what has become a truism of soul competency: "The practical effect of the stress upon 'soul competency' as the cardinal doctrine of the Baptists was to make every man's hat his own church."[107]

When the only acknowledged authority is that of personal experience, when 'what the Bible means is what it means to me' is the measure of doctrine any links historically to doctrine or tradition are quickly dissolved. Mullins himself is quoted as saying, "creeds become barriers to the free development of personality in religion."[108] This was the same stance that the radical Anabaptist movements adopted. They broke with ecclesiastical traditions and demanded a relative independence from heritage, tradition, and the present community of the church. Into this vacuum, however, stepped a new tradition. This is the result of soul liberty/competency. All traditional and historic creeds are rejected. Theological commitments are altered for every person's felt needs and the new authority of personal experience and belief takes over.

Individualism

Timothy George in commenting on this period (nineteenth and early twentieth century) said that historically Baptist life was shaped by "strong communal forces." This

[105] Nettles, "The Rise and Demise of Calvinism," 11.
[106] Wingfield, 5.
[107] Mohler, "Dr. Mohler's Fideltas," 14.
[108] Nettles, "Rise and Demise of Calvinism," 10.

communal character of Baptist life was seen in covenants, confessions, and catechisms but these were undermined by the "privatization of Baptist theology" and the rising tide of "modern rugged individualism."[109] This rugged individualism continued longer in the southern and western regions than in the north. The frontier environment contributed to this rugged individualism, experiential religion, and a general anti-intellectualism that accompanied it. As was seen in the discussion of soul competency the autonomy of the individual actually works at cross purposes to the authority of Scripture regardless of the esteem in which Scripture is professed to be held. Leon Pacala addresses this issue:

> The bedrock issue for any Christian doctrine of salvation is the mediation of Jesus Christ. Christians who ponder the salvation of which the Christian kerygma speaks are not pondering psychological manifestations, moral codes or religious behavior. If one insists on deciding the issues at stake in a Christian doctrine of salvation in such terms, it is difficult to see any other consequence than placing doctrine constantly at the mercy of personal and highly arbitrary determinations. Whenever this route is followed productive discussion and theological effort are impaired by conclusions established by such frivolous factors as cultural pressures and personal tastes.[110]

The autonomy of the local church coupled with the "competency" of the individual believer produced confessions that were not only not binding but as Schaff says were "mere declarations of faith prevailing at the time in the denomination, to which no one is bound to give assent beyond the measure of his own conviction."[111] This individualism multiplied the interpretation of theological positions exponentially. No one theologian, no one school, no one confession could bring any consensus in this autonomous government by the individual.

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[109] Timothy George, Dean of Beeson Divinity School, Telephone interview, 8 July 2006.
[110] Leon Pacala, "A Survey of the Christian Doctrine of Salvation," *Foundations* V:4 (October 1962): 329.
[111] Schaff, 852.

The danger here should be obvious. David Wells has made the keen observation that "the self is altogether inadequate to bear the entire burden of creating this . . . spiritual meaning . . . It has succeeded only in blowing all its feelings and intuitions up to grandiose proportions."[112] "The only acknowledged authority is that of personal preference."[113] The individual determination of which doctrine(s) would shape Southern Baptist theology was probably less of a shaping influence and more of a limiting influence. This rugged autonomy virtually assured that no confession; no statement put forth by the Convention would carry any weight as a test of orthodoxy. Unfortunately, once the autonomous individual becomes the central authority figure that necessarily puts the authority of Scripture second regardless of protestations to the contrary. "Thus saith the Lord" is more and more replaced by 'it seems to me.'

Sectarianism

The fierce independence and sectarianism of Baptists during the Great Awakening and later on the frontier essentially denied the common denominator of Christian churches. Claiming, particularly under the influence of Landmarkism, to be the only true church Baptists found themselves basically in competition with other churches. Halbrooks commenting on this factor said, "Graves developed non-cooperation into an art form by enunciating arguments claiming to show not only that Baptists could not cooperate with other churches, there were no other churches; Baptist churches were the only true churches."[114] It was Landmarkism according to Halbrooks that "pushed Baptists in the direction of a diverse sectarianism, denominational isolationism, and

[112] David F. Wells, *God in the Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1994), 94.
[113] Ibid., 114.
[114] Halbrooks, 9.

religious arrogance."[115] Timothy George agrees stating, "Landmarkism reinforced Baptist tendencies to isolation and separatism."[116]

Some of Graves prejudices against other Protestant denominations that "sprang," as he said, from the Roman Catholic church are still alive and well in Southern Baptist life. George says that anti-Catholicism and sectarianism are far from dead in Southern Baptist life.[117] Baptist distinctives, which might be called Baptist differences, are a source of pride and possibly the arrogance Halbrooks mentions. It is a focus on these distinctives that looms as more important in Southern Baptist life than a solid doctrinal confession upon which all Southern Baptists can hang their "hat." George adds:

> Further emphasis on Baptist distinctives such as separation of church and state, the non-sacramental character of the ordinances, and the non-credal character of our confessions appeared as a litany of negative constraints, rather than the positive exposition of an essential doctrinal core. Indeed, for some Baptists these so-called distinctives, often interpreted in an attenuated, reductionistic form, became the essence of the Baptist tradition itself.[118]

As noted above, sectarianism tends to produce an apologetic theology and the sectarianism that is alive and well in the Southern Baptist churches requires that much time and energy be devoted to defending the Baptist distinctives. This leaves little time or interest in further propagation and refining of traditional theology, even that held by most of the key Southern Baptist founders, rather time and energy has to be devoted to defending distinctives that isolate and to some extent insulate Southern Baptists from other groups. It is easier and more expedient to abandon traditional theology, as

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[115] Ibid., 10.
[116] George, "Southern Baptist Ghosts," 22.
[117] George, Telephone interview.
[118] Timothy George, "Southern Baptist Theology, Whence and Whither," *Founders Journal* 19/20 (Winter/Spring 1995): 24.

Calvinism, particularly when it contradicts or does nothing to further sectarian distinctives.

Pragmatism

The case of C. H. Toy is a notorious example of the pragmatic way in which Southern Baptists approach divergent theological issues. Toy was professor of Old Testament at Southern Seminary in the late nineteenth century and at one point was engaged to the famous missionary Lottie Moon. This is not a discussion of the Toy case other than to say Toy resigned under considerable pressure in 1879. Phyllis Tippet and W. H. Bellinger, Jr. wrote for the *Baptist History and Heritage* an article relating to the Toy affair. Disaffection for Toy arose primarily over his approval of the documentary hypothesis view of Scripture and a desire to accommodate Scripture to recent findings of geology and evolution, which were all the rage at that time in scientific circles.[119]

Tippit and Bellinger make an analysis of the Toy case. But, what is more interesting than their conclusions about Toy and his orthodoxy, or lack thereof, is their conclusion about the way the Southern Baptists handle theological conflict. They say that "no real discussion of the theological issues" in the Toy case was ever held but "the decision was made on pragmatic grounds."[120] "His resignation was accepted for pragmatic reasons - to avoid public dissent at the meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention and to avoid damage to the young seminary."[121] The crux of their summary then is the way this is reflected today in Southern Baptist life:

> In other words, the public issue was not the soundness of his

[119] Phyllis R. Tippit and W. H. Bellinger, Jr., "Repeating History: The Story of C. H. Toy," *Baptist History and Heritage* 38:1 (Winter 2003): 23-24.
[120] Ibid., 31.
[121] Ibid., 25.

> views but whether they were out of step with the average Baptist, a criterion that set a precedent for academic constraint in Southern Baptist seminaries still in effect today. [Additionally] the denominational structure Baptists in the South have chosen still does not lend itself to providing a forum for the open discussion of theological issues. Emotional appeals on pragmatic grounds often carry the day in matters of denominational conflict.[122]

David Wells writes, "The skills and techniques for the management of the church determine what theology should be studied, not the importance of truth itself."[123] It appears that more and more the story of the Southern Baptists is the story of resistance to theological consistency in favor of a pragmatic efficiency. Michael Calvert says that "semi-Pelgianism and Arminianism work because they build bigger churches and resonate with the heart of our culture."[124] Timothy George adds that, "Many evangelicals seduced by the cult of pragmatism, have bought the liberal line that the way to peace and success in the church is to define the smallest number of doctrines possible, and to hold them as lightly as one can."[125]

Has this cult of pragmatism infected Southern Baptist life and practice? Turning again to George: "There developed, not least among Southern Baptists, a kind of theological vacuity, a doctrinal numbness . . . an insipid culture religion cut off from the vital wellsprings of the historic Baptist heritage. Denominational pragmatism became the infallible dogma of Southern Baptist life."[126]

It has long been the case that Southern Baptists use denominational statistics as indicators of health. This is a pragmatic answer. The resultant growth and expansion of

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[122] Ibid., 26, 32.
[123] David F. Wells, *No Place for Truth, or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1993), 256.
[124] Michael P. Calvert, Pastor Christ Presbyterian Church, PCA, Personal interview, 19 July 2006. (Dr. Calvert is a former professor at Reformed Theological Seminary and a former Southern Baptist pastor.)
[125] Timothy George, "The Subtle Lure of Liberalism," *Founders Journal* 9 (Summer 1992), 18.
[126] George, "Whence and Whither," 3.

the Southern Baptist Convention has to be proof of the correctness of their dogma. This kind of hyper-pragmatism has severely loosened as George says its grip on its theological heritage. Calvert says the crux of the pragmatism issue is the result. Are they regenerate? With decisional regeneration, practiced at an average age of five years, how can they be? With eighteen million members of which four and one-half million attend only once per year, how can they be?[127] In an earlier article, using 1997 statistics, Jim Elliff reported that according to the Strategic Information and Planning department of the Sunday School Board only 32.8% of the Southern Baptist's approximately sixteen million members even show up on any given Sunday.[128] A departure from historic theology has produced impressive numbers but this way to success with its light, hollow theology has apparently produced in many only an empty shell.

Anti-Paedobaptist Sentiment

There is no other issue that so defines Baptist and Southern Baptist life than the issue of baptism – thus the name Baptist. This subject, both supporting and denying the Baptist position, has been expounded, exegeted, and effectively exhausted by some of the best minds in Christendom both past and present. There is little or nothing that can be added to all those books, articles, and papers. However, what is in view in the present inquiry is how or if a distinctive view of baptism influences theology or a shift in theology.

A few examples of the state of the discussion will suffice to support the wide ranging positions. From Smyth and Helwys to the 2000 Baptist Faith and Message,

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[127] Calvert, Personal interview.
[128] Jim Elliff, "Southern Baptists, an Unregenerate Denomination," *Christian Communicators Worldwide*, 27 October 2003, 1.

Baptists have asserted that Christian baptism is the "immersion" of a "believer" in water in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Sinclair Ferguson in discussing the mode of baptism says that "no single baptism or New Testament exposition of the meaning of baptism placed alongside the other expositions of the meaning of baptism indicate explicitly what mode was employed in the New Testament church."[129] Timothy George states that, "One of the most important contributions which Baptists have made to the wider life of the church is the recovery of the early church practice of baptism as an adult right of initiation signifying a committed participation in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ."[130] John Calvin in Book IV of the *Institutes* replies to critics who say that infant baptism was not practiced in the New Testament church, "The assertion . . . that a long series of years elapsed after the resurrection of Christ, during which pædobaptism was unknown, is a shameful falsehood, since there is no writer, however ancient, who does not trace its origin to the days of the apostles."[131]

Halbrooks ties the Baptist doctrine of baptism to their doctrine of the church. "Southern Baptists used their literal interpretation of Scriptures not only on the issue of race, but in other issues as well. Their interpretation of the meaning and place of baptism in the church reflected the Frontier and Western Roots. Such an interpretation provided fertile soil for the growth of Landmarkism."[132]

As noted above, oceans of ink have been spilled on this issue and there is no resolution or any argument that dissuades one side or the other. It must be said, however,

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[129] Sinclair B. Ferguson, "Systematic Theology II," *Reformed Theological Seminary-Virtual*, 2003, sound cassette.
[130] George, "Whence and Whither," 28.
[131] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1997), 534.
[132] Halbrooks, 11.

that the Baptist doctrine of baptism derives primarily from their doctrine of the church and the competency of the believer or is it the other way around? Congregational government almost necessarily implies that each member is competent to vote on issues. This excludes infants and those who have not reached an age of discernment. They are also excluded from a believer's only church, being unable to understand and thus believe. "[Baptists] reject infant baptism as an unscriptural innovation and profanation of the sacraments, since an infant cannot hear the gospel, nor repent and make a profession of faith. They believe, however, in the salvation of all children dying before the age of responsibility."[133]

This raises some issues when one hears that the average age of those baptized in Southern Baptist churches is less than five years.[134] Much of Baptist evangelism is directed toward children who are encouraged to agree with some facts, raise their hand, say a prayer and then are assumed to be regenerate. Thus "qualified" for baptism the Baptists can hold to their doctrine of believer's only baptism and a church membership made up only of regenerate people. Calvin noted long ago that

> They seem to think they produce their strongest reason for denying baptism to children, when they allege, that they are as yet unfit, from nonage, to understand the mystery which is there sealed – viz. spiritual regeneration, which is not applicable to the earliest infancy. Hence they infer, that children are only to be regarded as sons of Adam until they have attained an age fit for the reception of the second birth. But all this is directly opposed to the truth of God.[135]

Roy Edgemon, when he was the Director of Discipleship Training for the Sunday School Board, studied the whole Baptist evangelistic practice and found much of

[133] Schaff, 845-846.
[134] George, Telephone interview.
[135] Calvin, 540.

it "manipulative, shallow, abortive, and without integrity."[136] The result of such practices as "Edgemon observes, is that 'we lose thousands of people who are going to die and go to hell, thinking they're saved.'"[137] One has to wonder if Edgemon is placed in the category of some earlier Southern Baptists who when they "felt constrained to doubt an uninterrupted Baptist succession were accused of betraying their denomination into the hands of the pedobaptists. Concern for truth and fact seemed for the time to have been slavishly subordinated to denominational interests and prejudices."[138]

None of what is said here is designed as a refutation of the Baptist position on baptism, clearly one of their chief distinctives. But with an average age of five years for those being baptized in Southern Baptist churches and "many much younger,"[139] producing a practice that can only be called "toddler baptism,"[140]even the doctrines that respected Southern Baptist theologians have articulated so carefully in regard to their doctrine of baptism are summarily laid aside for pragmatic, individual, and denominational interests.

Probably nothing more than this distinctive doctrine of mode and subjects of baptism reflects what has become the relative looseness with which the Southern Baptists hold doctrine. Why would they hold to Calvinistic doctrines coming out of the reformation if such doctrines are contrary to the perceived needs and felt theology of individuals, individual churches, and denominational goals when they cannot even hold

[136] Thomas Ascol, "Southern Baptists at the Crossroads: Returning to the Old Paths," *Founders Journal* 19/20 (Winter/Spring 1995): 2.
[137] Ibid.
[138] Patterson, 341.
[139] George, Telephone interview.
[140] Ibid.

to the one doctrine they have held so long against so much opposition without compromising it under the same pressures?

CHAPTER 4

HERMENEUTICS AND PRACTICE

With Smyth and Helwys saying that infant baptism "was unacceptable in the true church"[141] and Fisher Humphreys adding that "practices shape beliefs,"[142] a look at the Baptist doctrine of baptism and the church is in order. From the extremes of the Landmarkers, who claimed to be the only true church, to the autonomy of the local church represented in *The Baptist Faith and Message* it is clear that the Southern Baptist doctrine of the church is indeed a major factor in shaping their hermeneutics and theology. Ligon Duncan, in speaking on covenants and the sacraments, noted that "there are certain aspects of the Baptist doctrine of the church that impact on how they view the issue of baptism itself."[143] Since baptism is the most obvious and universal doctrine of Southern Baptists but one that may have yielded more to practice than doctrine, it is appropriate to consider this relationship between ecclesiology and their doctrine of baptism as well as how their doctrine of the church plays into their theology. Again, this is not an attempt to settle the long-standing debate over infant baptism or a church composed of believers only who have been baptized or in many cases re-baptized by immersion. Rather the point is to determine the purpose and origin of departure from the

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[141] Bill J. Leonard, *Word of God Across the Ages:Using Christian History in Preaching* (Greeneville: Smyth and Helwys Publishing, 1991), 88.
[142] Fisher Humphreys, "Baptists and Their Theology," *Baptist History and Heritage* 35 (Winter 2000): 16.
[143] Ligon Duncan, "The Reformed Doctrine of Baptism and New Testament Practice," available from http://www.fpcjackson.org/resources/apologetics.html; Internet; accessed 12 July 2006.

doctrines of Calvinism. This departure is said to be based on careful hermeneutics but were the hermeneutics shaped by practice, by the underlying freedom and autonomy, and specific doctrines rather than the other way round.

Ecclesiology

Tom Nettles says, "A Baptist church cannot exist where there is no regenerate church membership and no affirmation of believer's baptism. These are the ecclesiological *sine qua non's*."[144] One has to say that all true churches must include regenerate membership and although Nettles uses the term "believer's baptism" as an anti-paedobaptism term, in truth all true churches believe in baptizing believers who come to faith in Christ and who were not baptized as infants. As this issue is examined one has to ask what does "baptized believer" mean? Bill Leonard said, "The issue of rebaptism of Southern Baptist church members is a new and ever increasing phenomenon deserving serious study. This practice has implications for the way Southern Baptists understand conversion, evangelism, baptism, and church membership. All this suggests the Southern Baptists are in a period of transition or at least uncertainty as to what it means to be a baptized believer and the relationship of that believer to the congregation."[145] It seems that the *sine qua non* of Baptist church existence is in some jeopardy. Much of this confusion, Timothy George says, is because the Southern Baptist Convention tried to accommodate the culture. He adds that "the church always goes back and forth between the twin poles of identity and adaptability."[146]

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[144]Thomas J. Nettles, *By His Grace and for His Glory: A Historical, Theological, and Practical Study of the Doctrines of Grace in Baptist Life* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1986), 27.
[145] Paul Basden, ed., *Has Our Theology Changed? Southern Baptist Thought since 1845* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1994), 173.
[146] Timothy George, Dean of Beeson Divinity School, Telephone interview, 8 July 2006.

What is the Southern Baptist doctrine of the church? When *The Baptist Faith and Message* (revised 2000) says, "Baptists should hold themselves free to revise their statements of faith as may seem to them wise and *expedient* at any time," (emphasis added) what is the doctrine of the church and which Southern Baptist churches hold it?

As noted above, the average age of those being baptized in Southern Baptist churches today is five years.[147] "The growing number of preschool children receiving baptism in SBC churches has led to concerns about the meaning of a *believer's* church and the relationship between baptism and church membership."[148] Again this is not an argument to prove paedobaptism as the biblical model versus "toddler-baptism" but rather to question the accommodation that Southern Baptists have made to their theology and in the case at hand to their ecclesiology. Bill Leonard raises a number of these questions.

> What is the nature of conversion and its relationship to church membership? What is the relationship of the local congregation to the regional and national denominational organizations? What is the correlation between the authority of the minister and the authority of the congregation? Where is the authority of Christ most manifest, in the clergy or in the congregation or both? Should pre-schoolers and elementary age children have equal status with adults in the decision making process of the congregation? Should children be permitted to vote in church affairs?[149]

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[147] Although this information was obtained through an interview with Timothy George the statistics published by the SBC do not bear this out. This was in all likelihood an exaggerated generalization to make a point. This issue is obviously on the minds of many Southern Baptists. Paul R House, editor of The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology wrote that "statistics compiled by the North American Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention reveal that as many as half of all adults baptized in Southern Baptist churches are rebaptisms of persons already baptized by Southern Baptist pastors . . . Another forty percent of adults baptized are Christians from other denominations that have never been immersed . . . ten percent then of all adults baptized by Southern Baptist churches are making first-time professions of faith." (available http://www.sbts.edu/news/sbjt/spring98edit.htm) If this is correct and one discounts these "rebaptisms" in 2001-2002 over ninety-two percent of baptisms were non-adult and of that number fifty-nine percent in 2001 and fifty-five percent in 2002 were under eleven years of age. It is possible that George, Leonard, and others know much more about how these statistics are compiled and that the true picture is much closer to what George quotes than the raw data portrays.

[148] Basden, 172.

[149] Ibid., 172, 178-179.

The Baptist Faith and Message defines the church thus: "A New Testament church of the Lord Jesus Christ is an autonomous local congregation of baptized believers . . . Each congregation operates under the Lordship of Christ through democratic processes. In such a congregation each member is responsible and accountable to Christ as Lord." Local church autonomy, individual competency, and government by the congregation create an atmosphere wherein expediency and sentiment rule the day. The problem that underlies many of Leonard's questions is the competency of the "baptized believers" to participate in church government. It would seem that many, particularly the children, are deemed competent to exercise faith, believe on the Lord Jesus as He is presented in the Gospel for salvation, but lack the competency to vote on issues of church government. As Leonard noted above rebaptism is a growing issue. Of the 790,823 baptisms reported in 2001 and 2002 by the Southern Baptist Convention based on the figures noted above 322,566 were "rebaptisms", a full forty-one percent. Were these people members of a church made up exclusively of "baptized believers" prior to their second or later baptism, in some cases? If so how does their presence in the church impact the questions above?

This is not a new problem for a resolution passed at the 1988 Southern Baptist Convention proclaimed, "The doctrine of the Priesthood of the Believer in no way contradicts the biblical understanding of the role, responsibility, and authority of the pastor . . . that resolution created significant disagreement among Southern Baptists regarding the authority of the individual believer, the local congregation, and the pastor."[150] When pastor and congregation disagree it is typically put to a vote of the congregation – those voting being comprised of many who are of insufficient

[150] Basden, 177-178.

understanding to comprehend the issues or unregenerate people who only later realize their state but are for all outward appearances baptized believers.

Maring and Hudson comment that "the distinctive character of Baptist life . . . springs from a particular understanding of the church . . . [but] when expediency becomes the primary consideration in determining its form and program, the essential character of the church may be obscured."[151] As George said "the church always goes back and forth between identity and adaptability."[152] Baptist identity and with it Southern Baptist identity has been fixed for over three centuries but the point is whether or not adaptability and expediency have led to an abandonment of distinctive Baptist doctrines and even doctrines once held in common with Reformed people.

The Old Testament

The Southern Baptists have a high view of Scripture. However, it must be said that many Baptists have placed the Old Testament in a subordinate position or just plain ignored it altogether. "The Baptist story is one of a group of believers who desired to have churches based on the authority of the New Testament."[153] While those like J.M. Carroll and many of his readers insist on the New Testament and the New Testament alone this is not an isolated phenomena. In an 1874 booklet entitled *Church – Members' Hand-book of Theology* (a little handbook for SBC Sunday School instruction) Norvell Robertson writes, "*If the word atonement was a scriptural term*, and of frequent occurrence in the New Testament, like justification and redemption, *we might ascertain*

[151] Norman H. Maring and Winthrop S. Hudson, *A Baptist Manual of Polity and Practice* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1963), 17.
[152] George, Telephone interview.
[153] Taunton Norman, *The Baptist Way: Distinctives of a Baptist Church* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2005), 11.

its scriptural meaning . . . but it is not so . . . The word is often used in the Old Testament, respecting the sacrifices offered under that dispensation, and *in this light I suppose it may be said to be a scriptural term.*"[154] (emphasis added) It was said of W.T Conner, who taught systematic theology at Southwestern Seminary for thirty-nine years, that his "actual use of the Bible [was] largely limited to the New Testament."[155] As has been cited above Baptists generally rejected creeds and "more and more there was the appeal simply to the Bible and, it has to be said, particularly to the New Testament as the touchstone of the Baptists for their doctrine."[156]

It could be said that in the hinterland where Landmarkism is still alive and well there is more of a tendency to regard the New Testament as a replacement for the Old Testament rather than a fulfillment of it. Sectarianism in any form just naturally narrows one's focus whether that focus is Scripture, doctrine, or heritage. This reflects what C.S. Lewis called chronological bigotry, i.e., "we think we [or our doctrinal system] are the only ones to ever have discovered a particular truth and that we understand it better than any group ever. We're not interested in what people knew long ago."[157] Most Baptists would say that they get their theology straight from the Bible or in some cases the New Testament. It's just the Bible, the Holy Spirit, and me. This is the root of soul competency and one of the things that plague evangelicalism today. This coupled with a separation from the traditional heritage of the church produces theological formulations that are extremely dangerous. The view that the Old Testament has somehow been

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[154] Norvell Robertson, *Church – Members' Hand-book of Theology* (Memphis: Southern Baptist Publishing Society, 1874; reprint, Harrisonburg: Gano Books, 1983), 209.
[155] Basden, 36.
[156] W. M. S. West, "Foundation Documents of the Faith: VIII Baptists and Statements of Faith," *Expository Times* 91:8 (May 1980): 231.
[157] Richard Pratt, "Introduction to Theological Studies," *Reformed Theological Seminary-Virtual*, 2003, course notes, 85.

superseded is one of these dangerous formulations. The Old Testament adds its own perspectives which supplement and shed light on what can be a one-sided emphasis if viewed only from a New Testament perspective. It is a dangerous kind of hermeneutic which begins with the New Testament and works backward to the Old Testament. When one does this they start with the wrong hermeneutic. This slant, which many Southern Baptists take, radically transforms the understanding of the nature of God's covenant

An Old Testament Perspective – Jeremiah 31

The New Testament church is a recurrent theme in many Southern Baptist statements. This new covenant church is based in the eyes of many Southern Baptists on the new covenant, i.e., New Testament to the exclusion or practical discounting of the Old Testament (covenant). Christ's coming is seen as the inauguration of a new thing. The church is seen as beginning with the apostles or at Pentecost and thus totally disconnected from Israel, the Old Testament, and old covenant promises and administration. Many tend to see the Old Testament only as history leading up to and prophecy foretelling the coming of Christ.

But the question has to be raised, where do we first find the new covenant articulated? Where are the distinctives of the new covenant set forth? Jesus said in Luke 22:20, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood."[158] Paul repeats these words in I Corinthians 11:25. (It is worth noting that the accounts of Matthew and Mark read, "the blood of the covenant" in most manuscripts.) Hebrews 8:8-12 and 10:16-17 quote Jeremiah 31:31-34 in full or in part and Hebrews 12:24 speaks of Jesus as the "mediator of a new covenant." Hebrews 9:15-22 says that "Christ is the mediator of a new

[158] Unless otherwise indicated all Bible references in this paper are to *New International Version* (NIV) (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984).

covenant," and says that His death was "a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant." II Corinthians 3:5-14 speaks of the "glory of the new covenant." That is the sum of the explicit New Testament teaching regarding the new covenant. All this teaches us that a new covenant was instituted, that it is superior to, more glorious than the old covenant but what are the covenant conditions, i.e., who are the parties, the terms (the blessings and cursings) attached to it, what is the sign of the covenant, and what is the ritual confirming it? If it is indeed modeled after the other covenants in Scripture we would expect to find these elements present. If they are not present within the pages of the New Testament (covenant) where should we look? There is but one place and that is within the Old Testament.

It is obvious from its frequent citation in the New Testament that Jeremiah 31:31-34 is the key Old Testament passage concerning the new covenant. Jeremiah is the only Old Testament prophet to refer to the new covenant. There are references in Isaiah 42:6 that speak of the Servant of the Lord as a covenant for the people, which is referenced in the New Testament in Luke 2:20 and Acts 26:23. Isaiah 55:3, 61:8; Jeremiah 32:36-40, 50:4-5, Ezekiel 16:60, 37:26-28 all speak of an everlasting covenant, and Ezekiel 36:26f speaks of a new heart that aided by the Spirit of the Lord will keep His decrees and laws, and Paul quotes Jeremiah as he says that God will remove godlessness from Israel: "And this will be my covenant with them when I take away their sins." (Romans 11:27) While these passages give us a sense of a coming covenant that is different and permanent, like the New Testament usages, they don't reveal too many conditions other than Ezekiel 36 which mirrors some of the same changes within the hearts of God's people that Jeremiah reveals. Overall then, Jeremiah gives us the clearest

picture of this new covenant as far as participants, administration, and terms are concerned. The New Testament tells us Christ is the mediator of this new covenant, that it is more glorious than the old, and Jesus Himself says the blood that confirmed the new covenant, was to be His own blood.

What does Jeremiah tell us that will help in our understanding of the new covenant? Does this confirm or deny Southern Baptist ecclesiology and distinctives?

Jeremiah begins in verse thirty-one with an eschatological formula, "The time is coming." The new covenant is an eschatological promise. Richard Pratt says, "All evangelicals agree that Jeremiah's new covenant prediction is fulfilled in the New Testament era."[159] Isaiah 61:8, Jeremiah 32:36-40, and Ezekiel 37:26-28 all speak of the restoration of Israel after the exile and of a covenant that will be different in that it will be an "everlasting covenant." The question arises as to what happened to the earlier covenants made with Israel? Were not the Noahic, Abrahamic, Mosaic, and Davidic covenants permanent? They were, but the possibility of breaking these covenants existed and man's sinful nature being what it is these possibilities became realities. Deuteronomy 29 spells out the blessings and cursings for following or breaking the covenant with Yahweh. Deuteronomy 30 indicates they will not be obedient and will be exiled but the Lord will restore them and "circumcise [their] hearts and the hearts of [their] descendants, so that [they] may love him with all [their] heart and with all [their] soul and live." Jeremiah tells us the new covenant will be different from the covenant made when God delivered them from Egypt. The difference is after the promise of Deuteronomy: "It will not be like the [former] covenant . . . because they broke my

[159] Richard Pratt, "Jeremiah 31: Infant Baptism In The New Covenant," *IIIM Magazine Online* Vol. 4, No. 1, 7 January 2002, http://www.thirdmill.org/files/english/html/th/TH.h.Pratt.New.Covenant.Baptism.html, 2.

covenant." Jeremiah distinguishes the new covenant from what had gone before by saying the new covenant cannot be broken.

How is it that the new covenant cannot be broken? Because God says He will make a new covenant "after those days," again indicating some future fulfillment. This covenant will be put in their minds and written on their hearts. This is the reason it will be unbreakable. It will be a change in the hearts and minds of the people rather than an external covenant document or treaty. Pratt says, "This feature of the new covenant demonstrates that God himself will bring about deep internal transformation in his covenant people . . . Jeremiah did not see entrance into the new covenant community as entrance into an external environment, but as undergoing a spiritual change."[160] There are echoes here of the new heart expressed in Ezekiel 36:26f and the New Testament idea of regeneration, particularly as expressed by John in the new birth. This transformation of the covenant from external to internal, put into the heart of His people is the work of God – "*I* will make," "*I* will put." The basic formula of the covenant "I will be their God and they will be my people" (Leviticus 26:12, Ezekiel 11:20, Zechariah 8:8) is expressed as the cause of the promised internal transformation.

Blessings flow from this new covenant written on the heart, a covenant that cannot be broken. In verse 34 Jeremiah writes of these covenant people; "they will all know me." Jeremiah had already emphasized the results of knowing/not knowing the Lord: "My people are fools, they do not know me . . . They are skilled in doing evil" (4:22); "let him who boasts boast about this; that he knows me" (9:24); "they go from one sin to another; they do not acknowledge me, declares the Lord" (9:3). The promise of the new covenant is that all of the house of Israel will know the Lord and "I will forgive their

[160] Ibid., 3.

wickedness and will remember their sins no more" (31:34). The great blessing to flow from this new knowledge of the Lord was salvation. God will one day forgive their iniquity and sin.

What bearing does this have on the church? Is Jeremiah's prophecy strictly related to the nation of Israel and some future restoration of the nation of Israel as many dispensationalists hold? It is clear from the New Testament passages above that the new covenant became a reality in the earthly ministry of Christ. This coming of the new covenant ushers in a new relationship between God and His sinful people but what is the extent of that relationship, what is the extent of that knowledge?

One would think that this Old Testament passage would be exposited more in defense of several of the Baptist distinctives outlined above. The doctrine of soul competency and the autonomy of the individual believer from which flows the autonomy of the local congregation would seem to find incredible support from Jeremiah 31:31-34. In addition, Richard Pratt in writing on infant baptism said that three things in this passage are thought to be contrary to the practice of infant baptism: 1.) the new covenant couldn't be broken, 2.) the new covenant is fully internalized, 3.) all participants in the new covenant are eternally redeemed.[161]

The extent of the knowledge of God and the resultant relationship is clear in the difference between the two covenants. Since Jeremiah 31:31-34 is quoted in its entirety in Hebrews 8 it would be fitting to look there for some problems or faults with the old covenant. Is there something wrong with the covenant promises or the conditions? No, but the old covenant was deficient in some areas as compared with the new covenant. First, "In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in

[161] Ibid., 2-3.

various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son." (Hebrews 1:1-2a) The revelation in the old covenant was incomplete and somewhat obscured or shadowy. But when Christ came as the fulfillment of all the old covenant types and figures we necessarily have a better covenant without fault. What was incomplete is made complete.

Secondly, the old covenant was provisional in nature. The law was "holy, just, and good" (Romans 7:12) but it was never intended to be the means of salvation. Calvin says, "this passage increasingly refers to the kingdom of Christ, for without Christ, nothing could or ought to have been hoped for by the people, superior to the Law; for the Law was a rule of the most perfect doctrine."[162] The goal of this perfect doctrine was to show the need of a Savior, to demonstrate man's inability to fulfill the provisional requirements of the covenant. As Paul wrote in Galatians to those who sought justification in trying to keep the requirements of the first covenant, "[you] were held prisoners by law, locked up until faith should be revealed. So the law [the covenant made with the whole house of Israel] was put in charge to lead [you] to Christ." (Galatians 3:23-24) The fault with the first covenant lay not in its design or purpose. Calvin notes that the difference in the Law and the new covenant is in form. "God does not say here, 'I will give you another Law,' but I will write my Law, that is, the same Law."[163] The Law was faultless but it lacked the power to carry to fulfillment that which it brought to light. The old covenant achieved its goal for its goal was not perfection but rather to draw us to the new covenant reality of perfection that is found only in the true Mediator of a perfect covenant.

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[162] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1997), 124-125.
[163] Ibid., 132.

This again seems to point to an immediate restoration that would manifest itself all at once and move forward in perfection, an idea that many Southern Baptists articulate concerning the "true church." Christ, however, tells us in several parables that the kingdom of God has small beginnings and grows over time. To be sure, the new covenant has been cut. Christ's blood, as He said, being the blood of the covenant. But the inauguration of the new covenant does not mean it is here in all its fullness or perfection. The sacrifices of the old covenant have been abrogated due to Christ's one time perfect sacrifice but certain provisions of the new covenant are not fully realized. For example, there are still teachers in the new covenant – something Jeremiah said would be unnecessary (Jeremiah 31:34). Calvin says the Anabaptists seized upon this and "proudly boast that they are endued with the Spirit" and able to discern because it is one of the "encomiums given to the new covenant."[164] This sounds very much like the forerunner of the doctrine of soul competency but Calvin says the result is "that they are inebriated with strange and horrible doctrines."[165] The New Testament (covenant) says we should learn from the old (I Corinthians 10:6) not ignore it and make every man's hat his own source of theological formulation.

All this demonstrates that the law is not fully written on the hearts of God's people. The moral law still has to bind and restrain us for everyone does not fully know the Lord. It is of particular note that Hebrews says the old covenant "will soon disappear" or "is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to disappear." (NASV Hebrews 8:13) What is abundantly clear in this is that the law of God is not yet fully and completely written into the mind and onto the heart. Until such time as this complete

[164] Ibid., 135.
[165] Ibid.

restoration takes place there will be both true and false believers who are outwardly members of the new covenant community.

To cut the church loose from the Old Testament, to somehow have a disconnection between the Old Testament, the old covenant and its promised fulfillment is to rob the new covenant of much of its substance – a fact obviously not missed by the writer of Hebrews. But for many Southern Baptists, particularly those who focus their attention solely on the New Testament and draw their theology of the church from the New Testament alone there is a lack of depth not to mention a lack of understanding for as shown above the words "new covenant" may appear in places in the New Testament but often with little or no explanation of those words. Little explanation would have been required for the original readers for they were steeped in the Old Testament and knew and anticipated much of what was promised there.

Richard Pratt says, "the new covenant is not an isolated item which may be brought into Christian understanding by itself. Instead, the fulfillment of the new covenant must be understood as a part of a much larger set of hopes for the way things will be when the exile is completed."[166] He adds, "Often interpreters approach [Jeremiah 31] as if the new covenant had come in its fullness when Christ first came to earth, but this is a significant error."[167] As was noted above the expectations about the new covenant, often disconnected from any Old Testament reference and certainly not focused on any fulfillment of exilic promises, stand behind much of the opposition to infant baptism and underlie much of Baptist doctrine of the church.

[166] Pratt, "Jeremiah 31," 6.
[167] Ibid., 7.

From the time Smyth and Helwys became convinced that infant baptism was wrong and the church was to be composed solely of "baptized believers," the objections to paedobaptism have been based in part on the distinctives of the new covenant and those distinctives consciously or not draw on much of what Jeremiah had to say concerning the new covenant. He says that the new covenant will be different from the old because "they broke my covenant," i.e., the new covenant will not be able to be broken. One of the chief objections to paedobaptism is that many of these infants will grow up and be covenant breakers rather than covenant keepers; therefore they should not be included in the covenant and receive the initiatory sign of the covenant, baptism, until they are able to choose and make a conscious decision to be a covenant keeper.

It is clear from what has been said above that many, if not most, Southern Baptists view it in just that way. Pratt continues, "Instead, the fulfillment of the new covenant must be understood as part of a much larger set of hopes for the way things will be when the exile is completed. Our Christian understanding of the new covenant and its bearing on the question of infant baptism must parallel our understanding of all other restoration prophecies."[168] It is hard, if not impossible, to achieve such an understanding from the "New Testament alone" or in working backward from the New Testament to the Old. Pratt says it is helpful to look at this restoration process in three stages: "the inauguration" at Christ's first coming, "the continuation of fulfillment between the first and second comings of Christ," and the "consummation of the fulfillment at the return of Christ."[169] He says we must look at Jeremiah 31 with the understanding that the

[168] Ibid., 6-7.
[169] Ibid., 7.

restoration of the kingdom and renewal of the covenant do not take place until Jesus returns.

The three objections to infant baptism often cited from Jeremiah 31 fail because of the hermeneutic centered exclusively, or nearly so, on the New Testament. However, even in the New Testament, e.g. Hebrews 10:31, the writer cites Deuteronomy 32:36, which warned covenant people under the Mosaic covenant, as applicable to the new covenant.[170] "If judgment is a possibility under the new covenant, then so is covenant breaking that leads to that judgment."[171] This would remove the argument for excluding infants from the covenant and receiving the sign of the covenant because they might turn out to be covenant breakers. As was noted above there are and will be both true and false believers in the new covenant community and age will not prevent such false believers and covenant breakers from outwardly being members of the "believers only church."

Pratt says the internalization of the new covenant will come to complete fulfillment when Christ returns. "At the present time, however, this expectation is only partially fulfilled."[172] The New Testament commands us over and over to guard against corruption in our thinking. "The New Testament speaks this way because the promise of complete internalization of the law of God has begun within believers but it has not yet been completed."[173] One has to wonder if the many "rebaptisms" are not proof of this. Those seeking to be rebaptized (over 300,000 in 2001-2002) suffer from this. They lack a complete internalization of the new covenant so they believe something must be missing. They are "saved" again, or for the first time in their rationalization, and are

[170] Ibid., 8.
[171] Ibid.
[172] Ibid.
[173] Ibid.

rebaptized or truly baptized for the first time in their own mind, since they weren't really believers the first time, at least by the testimony of their own heart – lacking a complete internalization of the new covenant.

As for the third objection that infant baptism is wrong because the new covenant distributes salvation to all its participants, Pratt says this is true as it relates to the complete fulfillment of the new covenant at Christ's return but this promise is "fulfilled by the removal of unbelievers at the time of judgment. Only true believers will be left, and thus all who are in covenant will be saved."[174] If there is to be this separation obviously all are not believers. The new covenant community is a mixed community. Many of Christ's warnings and parables were illustrative of the fact that many in the community would prove, in the end, to be false believers.

Jonathan Edwards addressed some of these same questions. "Edwards believed that infants of believers should be baptized. He insisted that the Old Testament was not completely out of date. Children are still in the covenant."[175] When questioned about paedobaptism and responding to some of the questions raised above, Edwards "asks whether all who are admitted to baptism are regenerate."[176] He replies that they are not and by way of example says, "The apostles baptized many adults who were not regenerate. For example, Philip baptized Simon Magus . . ."[177] He replies secondly that "all children of godly persons when baptized [are not regenerate]."[178]

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[174] Ibid., 9.
[175] John Gerstner, "Jonathan Edwards on Infant Baptism," *The Rational Biblical Theology Of Jonathan Edwards*, vol 3. (Morgan: Soli Deo Gloria Publishing, 1991), 432.
[176] Ibid., 433.
[177] Ibid., 434.
[178] Ibid., 436.

Isaac Backus was an early Baptist who addressed this covenantal continuation. Wiley Richards writes of Isaac Backus that, "Backus argued the 'covenant of circumcision is as different from the covenant of grace, as Hagar was from Sarah, as Ishmael from Isaac; and we are solemnly called to view the difference in that light."[179] Against Backus, Louis Berkhof says that although circumcision was known among many people from earliest times but "only among Israel, however, did it become a sacrament of the covenant of grace."[180] It is strange that Backus refers to the "covenant of circumcision." By this line of reasoning one could say there is a covenant of baptism or a covenant of the Lord's Supper. Perhaps Backus' motive is clearer when one reads a little farther in Richards and finds: "Backus thus began the arduous task of differentiating Baptist theology from the older Covenant Theology of Congregationalism (Edwards) and Presbyterianism. His Calvinism had its limits."[181]

In a little book entitled *The New Testament Doctrine of the Church* published in 1951 by the Sunday School Department of the Baptist Sunday School Board, we find this issue addressed flatly: "Infant baptism did not start until some came to believe that baptism was essential to salvation."[182] This follows the work of some early Baptists like Thomas Crosby, the first Baptist historian, who in a lengthy preface to his first volume "traced a fundamental Baptist tenet, the rejection of infant baptism back to the first century. His purpose was to refute the charge of certain paedobaptists who claimed that Anabaptism arose with the reformation."[183] While Backus' Calvinism had its limits a

[179]W. Wiley Richards, *Winds of Doctrine* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1991), 28.
[180] Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1996), 620.
[181] Richards, 28.
[182] J. Clyde Turner, *The New Testament Doctrine of the Church* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1951), 72.
[183]W. Morgan Patterson, "The Development of the Baptist Successionist Formula," *Foundations* V:4 (October 1962): 337.

definite Arminian shift had taken place by 1951. Note from the Sunday School course above: "The fact that a child had parents who were godly church members did not open the door of the church to him . . . No one was ever coerced . . . *They made the choice*." (emphasis added)[184]

It is certain that the children of believers were once visibly in covenant with God and received the sign and seal of their admission into the covenant community. Calvin asks the question, "Why does the sacrament come after faith in Abraham and precede all intelligence in his son Isaac?"[185] In other words, where is Isaac's faith? Why is Isaac admitted to the covenant community? There is only one reason – by virtue of relationship to Abraham and at the command of God. Ishmael was also admitted visibly and received the same sign. In answer to the assertion of the Sunday School training course that pedobaptism was introduced by some merely by human prescription Calvin replies that such arguments are "no doubt specious."[186] The question that hangs over all of this is where do we find this covenant interest repealed or made void? Certainly Jesus Christ did not institute a new covenant to put believers and their children into a worse condition than they were under the old covenant. The words of Andrew Fuller may be appropriate here, although Fuller would not have used them to support this argument. "The question is whether we are to understand it of the New Testament as it were left by the sacred writer, or as corrected, amended, curtailed, and interpreted by a set of controvertists, with a view to make it accord with a favorite system."[187]

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[184] Turner, 41.
[185] Calvin, 545.
[186] Ibid., 529.
[187] Andrew Fuller, *The Complete Works of the Rev. Andrew Fuller*, vol. II (Harrisonburg: Sprinkle Publications, 1988), 2:206.

Is the Southern Baptist doctrine of the church and its members a curtailed interpretation of the New Testament, i.e., is it an interpretation disconnected from the Old Testament? Is it a doctrine that recognizes certain things as transferable but certain things as non-transferable? It is clear that many, although not all Southern Baptists, hold a kind of replacement theology rather than a fulfillment theology. Many like to "replace" the Old Testament with the New Testament.

The favorite answer to many of the objections raised to infant baptism and the covenant is that circumcision had a special function and it expired. With that expired any covenantal dealings with the people of God and their seed. They bolster this argument by appealing to a rather literal reading of Jeremiah 31, a reading as Pratt demonstrates that proves rather more than is needed, given a clearer interpretation of the implications of those promises.

For the Southern Baptists to claim their churches (what some have called the pure or true church) are made up of baptized believers, the fulfillment of Jeremiah's prophecies, is to ignore the mixed result, the testimony of the large percentage of adult "rebaptisms" (which meant false professions upon an earlier baptism), toddler professions, and what is a rather clear exegesis of the new covenant prophesied by Jeremiah.

The conclusions and ideas associated with baptism in the new covenant are very different for a Baptist than for one who believes in covenantal theology. This devolves from a general idea that the new covenant is coextensive with salvation. This results from using the New Testament exclusively or beginning with the New Testament and looking back to the Old Testament. This produces a hermeneutic that is shaped by

practice rather than the other way round. Similarly, the doctrine of the church, particularly as it relates to that visible community, winds up being very different. Baptists have a very difficult time accepting the fact that many in the church are unbelievers. As Pratt explained, the promises in regard to the new covenant in this regard are yet future but the baptistic mind set likes to equate the covenant keepers with the ones who decide to do so rather than the ones upon whose hearts God writes it. What Baptists overlook or ignore is the eternal nature of the covenant of grace.

This covenant was announced to Abraham. Galatians 3:8 calls the covenant with Abraham "the gospel." A view that abrogates the Old Testament and looks at the covenants therein as replacements of one another culminating in the new covenant fails to see the continuity of God's plan of redemption. That plan stretches from Adam to Christ's second coming wherein all things are consummated. The Abrahamic covenant was not superseded and set aside by the Mosaic covenant. The Mosaic covenant was not set aside by the Davidic covenant and none of the old covenant characteristics of the Covenant of Grace are set aside by the new covenant. It is interesting to note that Baptists, from Peter Edwards in 1795 (*Candid Reasons for Renouncing the Principles of Anti-Pædobaptism*) to present day Southern Baptist bloggers who have come to affirm infant baptism have one common thread. They see and have come to understand the continuity of grace running throughout God's plan of redemption in all its various covenantal administrations rather than separate covenants which terminated and were replaced. This replacement of covenantal symbols rather than a fulfillment of them is the key issue behind the baptism debate and further behind the rejection of covenant theology as a whole.

Underlying all this is the doctrine of the church. Baptists believe in all sincerity that a church composed of those who made the "decision" to follow Christ, to accept Him as their personal Lord and Savior, invite Jesus into their heart, etc. eliminate the problems of a church where infants are automatically included along covenantal ("house" or "household" in New Testament terms, Acts 16:15, 16:31, 34, 18:8, I Corinthians 1:16) lines. They fail to recognize that every covenant in Scripture included unbelievers and the new covenant is no different in this respect until the complete fulfillment of that covenant at Christ's return. However, with the number of rebaptisms that make up the actual adult baptisms and the ever decreasing age of children who are baptized (in their desire to have them "saved" and safe before they reach that magical age of accountability when they lose that elect status) the argument for a "true" or "pure church" becomes more and more tenuous. The statistics quoted above for 2001-2002 bear this out. This is the source of many of the questions which now haunt the Southern Baptist Convention – just some of the thorny issues expressed by the questions Bill Leonard posed above. These problems flow over into what Southern Baptists consider one of their strong points – evangelism.

Evangelism

There is a deep-seated prejudice in much of the Southern Baptist Convention against Calvinism. Timothy George says this is the result of a deep scar caused by the anti-missionary movements of the hyper-Calvinists in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.[188] As has been noted the Baptists had two distinct streams flowing into one, the General and Particular Baptists. Bill Leonard adds as "heirs of both the Calvinist and

[188] George, Telephone interview.

Arminian traditions, [Baptists] often selected and popularized diverse doctrines of salvation which, when held together had the potential for serious theological confusion."[189] "Southern Baptist evangelism," he adds, "provides an intriguing illustration of the development of conversion event in a pluralistic context."[190] This devolves into an "internal bartering between what our experience of the modern world will allow us to believe about God's providence and what we should think about it theologically."[191]

The rugged individualism of early Baptists on the frontier produced an independent spirit that is still deep-rooted in Southern Baptist life. People who were isolated from the settled establishment of the east and had to rely often solely upon their own ingenuity, wits, and determination to survive would naturally be adverse to a theology that said they were unable to do anything to affect their own salvation. Add to this a virtual theological isolation regarding scriptural teaching on the meaning and place of baptism and a marked tendency among the Landmarkers to reject other elements of the church as non-Christian and you have fertile ground for the theological confusion of which Leonard speaks.

This confusion is even present in the very term Calvinism. A recent article by Steve Lemke of New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary says "there is not just one Calvinism, but many Calvinisms."[192] He goes on to add that "in the Southern Baptist Convention there are essentially two streams of Calvinism. One stream is what we might

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[189] Bill Leonard, "Getting Saved in America: Conversion Event in a Pluralistic Culture," *Review and Expositor* 82 (Winter 1985): 123.
[190] Ibid.
[191] David F. Wells, *God in the Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1994), 154.
[192] Steve W. Lemke, "The Future of Southern Baptists as Evangelicals," presented at Maintaining Baptist Distinctives Conference, Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary, April 2005, Memphis.

call hard hyper-Calvinism (often associated with the Founder's Movement) and the other is a softer baptistic Calvinism."[193] This perfectly illustrates George's point about the deep-seated scars of hyper-Calvinism. It is a stretching of the term to call the views put forth by the majority, if not all of those in the Founders Movement hyper-Calvinists. Additionally, the "softer baptistic Calvinism" uses terms in very non-Calvinistic ways. Leonard says this unites "the language of Calvinism and the theology of Arminianism . . . in the transaction of conversionistic individualism." John Girardeau commenting on this situation late in the nineteenth century wrote:

> In admitting that faith is the gift of God, and that faith conditions salvation, the Arminian admits efficacious grace, and is logically bound to concede unconditional electing grace. But this he denies. He is therefore compelled to reconcile his doctrine that faith is the gift of God with one of his leading positions, namely, that the sinner's unconstrained will determines the question of his believing or not believing in Christ for salvation.[194]

This indeed holds what Leonard terms "potential for serious theological confusion."

This bears on the previous discussion of a "believers only church" and baptism or rather rebaptism. The one point of the Dortian formulation that most Southern Baptists will unreservedly affirm is the perseverance of the saints (although there are a few notable exceptions like Dale Moody). This has been baptized with the term "once saved, always saved." Leonard warns that this is a near fatal mistake to equate perseverance with this baptistic shibboleth, "For if salvation is once and for all, getting in and getting it right is the most, perhaps the only, significant aspect of conversion and discipleship . . . Conversion is less a process of experience with grace than an event

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[193] Ibid.
[194] John L. Girardeau, *Calvinism and Evangelical Arminianism* (Harrisonburg: Sprinkle Publications, 1984), 94.

which satisfies a salvific requirement."[195] This is what leads to the ninety percent rebaptism rate among adult Southern Baptists. They are people who are unsure whether or not they have met the salvific requirement, so many of them repeat this process, often multiple times. "Only a few churches require formal pre-baptismal instruction . . . thereby cheapening the meaning of baptism, contributing to a non-regenerate church membership."[196] As has been shown by statistics under **Ecclesiology** (p. 42) the majority of converts in Southern Baptist churches come to faith in early childhood. This derives from one primary reason and one principal practice. With children safe before reaching the nebulous "age of accountability" there is a major emphasis in Southern Baptist churches to have this salvific requirement met and out of the way as soon as possible. This desire leads to a practice that focuses much of the evangelistic effort in Southern Baptist churches on children. The author has personally observed this same emphasis in SBC short-term mission work as well.

Timothy George remarks that "for decades Southern Baptists have ignored the systematic religious instruction of young people assuming that a pious experience of 'Jesus in my heart' would suffice."[197] Often closing one's eyes in Bible School while the teacher repeats the sinner's prayer and raising one's hand at the end of the prayer satisfies the salvific requirement. It is no wonder these people feel the need to be "saved" again the first time an adult sized temptation and failure comes into their later life. Charles Deweese writes on this practice that, "defying believer's baptism, a few churches whose pastors promote preschool evangelism baptize three year olds – an oddity for a

[195] Leonard, "Getting Saved," 124.
[196] Charles W. Deweese, ed., *Defining Baptist Convictions: Guidelines for the Twenty-First Century* (Franklin: Providence House Publishers, 1996), 104.
[197] Timothy George, "Southern Baptist Ghosts," *First Things* 93 (May 1999): 23.

community of Christians who for almost 400 years have hammered out strong statements opposing infant baptism."[198]

Jim Elliff says, "Though these people have 'prayed the prayer' . . . and 'walked the aisle' and been told that they are Christians, old things have not really passed away, and new things have not come . . . Is it possible we have taken in millions of such 'unrepenting believers' whose hearts have not been changed?"[199] Roy Edgemon (quoted earlier) doesn't question if it is possible. He flatly said the result is that thousands "die and go to hell, thinking they're saved."[200] The real question is: what kind of evangelism is that? Rick Nelson asks, "Will eternity not expose our beloved Southern Baptist Zion as polluted by pragmatism and pride if no one dares to mention that the problem may lie in the methodology with a faulty doctrinal foundation?"[201] The foundation was once there with the particular Baptists, with Boyce, Mell, Dagg, and Manly. Where did it go? It went with the redefinition of Calvinistic terminology with Arminian meanings and the adopting of felt needs in a conversion event shaped by revivalism, church growth ecclesiology, and American culture.

The legacy of the non-cooperation of Baptists during the Great Awakenings, the rugged pioneer individualism of the frontier Baptists, the influence of revivalism, and the theological confusion that results from this mixture of Calvinism and Arminianism, this soft baptistic Calvinism has been reduced to evangelism that is demonstrably directed at children and, as baptismal statistics and comments of respected Southern Baptists show,

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[198] Deweese, 104.
[199] Jim Elliff, "Southern Baptists, an Unregenerate Denomination" *Christian Communicators Worldwide*, 27 October 2003, 2.
[200] Thomas Ascol, "Southern Baptists at the Crossroads: Returning to the Old Paths," *Founders Journal* 19/20 (Winter/Spring 1995): 2.
[201] Rick Nelson, "How Does Doctrine Affect Evangelism? The Divergent Paths of Asahel Nettleton and Charles Finney," *Founders Journal* 33 (Summer 1998): 5.

progressively younger and younger children. This flies in the face of the chief Southern Baptist distinctive and leaves their hermeneutical objections to infant baptism sounding very hollow. Again, this is not a debate about infant baptism. Many godly men have succinctly set forth persuasive arguments for the Baptist position. It is their practice that leaves one to wonder. The desire to see young people "saved" is in and of itself pure and good and in line with Scriptural mandates. However, the exercise of more and better creative ways to get younger and younger children to say "Jesus died on the cross for my sins" or "I have Jesus in my heart" is "shallow and manipulative" and is motivated at least in part as Leonard says to check that salvific requirement off the list so the church can breathe a collective sigh of relief that another little one is now eternally safe – all this from a group of believers that as a whole generally reject that little one's inclusion in God's covenant people from birth. David wells said, "It is no easy matter to straighten out doctrine when cultural and psychological pressures are weighing heavily against it."[202]

[202] David F. Wells, *God in the Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1994), 154.

CHAPTER 5

PRACTICAL EFFECTS

Many of the cultural and psychological pressures that weigh on Baptist doctrine are not new. The Southern Baptist Convention is today experiencing the cumulative weight of three hundred fifty years of such pressures. When Smyth and Helwys separated from the Church of England over the issue of infant baptism and opted for a "believers only" church they concurrently adopted a theology that was in some points disconnected from the Scripture from which they were said to draw their view of baptism. Their sect though persecuted drew strength from their individualism, pragmatism, and anti-paedobaptist stance. R.B. Kuiper warns, however, "Whatever form sectarianism may assume, it is always a great evil because it makes for narrowness, prejudice, and bigotry and is bound to obscure that glorious attribute of the church which is known as catholicity. A violation of the church's catholicity which is not unusual even among Protestants is to equate to all intents and purposes one's own denomination with the church of Christ."[203] This disconnection was to manifest itself with some of the earliest Baptist historians and particularly with the Landmarkers in the South.

[203] R.B. Kuiper, *The Glorious Body of Christ* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2001), 65.

The Disconnection

Not only did Smyth and Helwys become convinced that infant baptism was not scriptural, as was noted earlier, Smyth revises the doctrine of original sin – a disconnection from orthodoxy and the bulk of Christendom at that time. Whether this was to accommodate decisional regeneration or was a result of the Arminian theological controversy that was swirling around them in Holland no one can tell. The point is that these first Baptists not only differed on the proper recipients of baptism they also were disconnected from the orthodoxy of the church.

Roger Williams in turn faced persecution and was run out of Massachusetts not only over infant baptism but also because of a general lack of harmony with the Congregationalists. He "wrote vigorous denunciations of [the Baptist's] persecutors and often protested during their administration of infant baptism."[204]

Even the awakenings "divided Baptists into Regulars who resisted it and Separates who embraced it. The energetic evangelism of the Separates led them to moderate their Calvinistic theological heritage."[205] Revivalism by its nature is Arminian theologically and the competition and non-cooperation of the Baptists during the awakenings did two things – make Baptists the largest beneficiary of church growth from the awakenings and instill the idea of man's will as the primary factor in conversion. Techniques to move that will were practiced and honed by Charles Finney, Billy Sunday, and hundreds more evangelists. Much of the terminology of conversion was retained but it was disconnected from Calvinism.

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[204] G. Thomas Halbrooks, "The Roots of Southern Baptist Relationships with Other Denominations," *Baptist History and Heritage* 25:3 (July 1990): 5.
[205] Fisher Humphreys, "Baptists and Their Theology," *Baptist History and Heritage* 35 (Winter 2000): 16.

"The Landmark movement called Baptist churches to associate with each other as little as possible and it called them to avoid contact with non-Baptist churches entirely."[206] Their insistence on an unbroken line of Baptist churches all the way back to John the Baptist necessarily separated them from Calvinism but also from orthodoxy as they chose certain groups as the propagators of Baptist tradition only because they immersed adults not because of any theological stance.

This disconnection with the church and with Calvinism is not limited to history. Landmarkism is alive and well in many a Southern Baptist church, particularly in the rural south and west and an effort is underway by many in the "conservative" arm of the SBC to disconnect Southern Baptist theology from the evils of Calvinism. Much of this was summarized in a review by Bob Allen of an article by Ergun Craner, president of Liberty Theological Seminary and popular speaker in Southern Baptist circles. This article which was released just before the Southern Baptist Convention's annual meeting in 2006 had some notable examples and Allen expands on them with quotes from several key Southern Baptist figures. Witness the following montage:

> In recent years, some Southern Baptists have advocated a "reformation" to recover the Calvinism of the founders of the SBC, weakened in the 19th century by individualism and revivalism on the frontier and theology of missions and evangelism in the 20th. [This] resurgent Calvinism, which insiders also call the "doctrines of grace," is increasingly being blamed in SBC circles for ills including church splits, anemic evangelism and teaching views as unscriptural. Not only does the Calvinistic view portray a nature of God that is other than that in the Bible, but it also neglects an overall teaching of [the nature of God] in the Scripture. Calvinism [is] elitist, arrogant, a perverted form of theology and an abuse of Scripture. Everyone that gets in is the elect and he's elected all of us. Anyone can come to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.[207]

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[206] Ibid., 17.

[207] Bob Allen, "Tiptoeing Through the Tulip: Southern Baptists Divided over Calvinism," available from http://www.Ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID-7472 ; Internet; accessed 20 November 2006.

There is an obvious disconnection from the Calvinism of the founders. But some of the adherents of a rejection of Calvinism make a disconnection from Scripture just as Smyth and Helwys did. Witness two remarks by Paige Patterson, president of Southwestern Seminary and founder of the "conservative resurgence." "A five point Calvinist will not have problems in the Southern Baptist Convention unless it leads to 'unscriptural conclusions,' like not giving an invitation at the end of worship."[208] Patterson has several areas of concern with "some Calvinists." First, the notion that if "you are not a Calvinist then you must be an Arminian." He said he is neither. He "sees no biblical evidence for irresistible grace . . . [he believes] it is God's will that every human being be saved . . . There are antinomian tendencies present in some Calvinists, particularly on the subject of drinking alcohol."[209] Although Dr. Patterson could surely offer forceful and in some ways convincing arguments for his positions these redefinitions and hermeneutics shaped by practice are indicative of the problems discussed above and they exist not only in the hinterland but at the highest levels of Southern Baptist academia.

The Ascent of Man

What is obvious in much of the preceding survey is the primacy of man. Frank Stagg, professor at Southern Seminary said, "Salvation is not salvation for a person unless personhood itself be preserved."[210] In much of what has preceded we see the doctrines of grace come to depend on human will, the work of the Spirit is subjugated under the sinner's will, in fact, the whole plan of redemption is subject to the will and

[208] Ibid.
[209] "Views of Election – Mohler/Patterson," SBC Tapes, 2006, Sound cassette.
[210] Frank Stagg, *The Struggle for Meaning* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1977), 74.

decision of man. Girardeau writes, "I would ask their [Evangelical Arminians] attention to those ill-boding and alarming words issuing from high places: 'Man determines the question of his salvation.' Do they express the logical result of their theological principles?"[211] Are these not the words of Herschel Hobbs, Nelson Price, et. al? Man is left to make this decision without coercion, without the influence of irresistible grace, and God's sovereignty, His election, and predestination of people is suspended on the gossamer strand of human will. These ideas put such emphasis on man that it is natural for the fact that everything depends on God's grace to get lost. As Girardeau added, "Is it not time to subject these [theological] principles to a fresh examination?"[212]

The objection that is raised over and over by Southern Baptists, various examples of which are noted throughout this paper, is that Calvinism is narrow, elitist, and contrary to Scripture. These doctrines are said to be hateful and certainly not in keeping with what Scripture teaches us about the love of God and His desire to see everyone "saved." Calvin summed up this attitude. "So many dogs tear this doctrine . . . or, at least, assail it with their bark, refusing to give more license to God than their own reason dictates to themselves."[213] This is the crux of the matter. If it is illogical to man, a different doctrine must be formulated than what clearly sounds forth from Scripture. This necessitates a departure from doctrines that put man in a subordinate position, no matter how long they have been held or by whom. We must remember that nothing flows from God's Providence "that is not right, though reasons thereof may be concealed."[214] Calvin

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[211] John L. Girardeau, *Calvinism and Evangelical Arminianism* (Harrisonburg: Sprinkle Publications, 1984), 160.
[212] Ibid.
[213] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1997), 184.
[214] Ibid., 185.

agreed that there are many puzzles and it is one thing to modestly in faith accept such profound subjects but it is a whole different matter to reject doctrines clearly set forth in Scripture just because they frustrate man's reason or his ideas of fairness, goodness, love, and honesty.

J.R. Graves gives a perfect illustration of this as he assails the doctrine of unconditional election and reprobation as taught by Calvin. "It is . . . contrary to *our* reason as to *our* understanding of the Word of God." (emphasis added)[215] Herein lies the point. Should we not say like Job, "I put my hand over my mouth?" (Job 40:4) Those who subject the doctrines of grace to the judgment of men must answer God's question to Job: "Would you discredit my justice? Would you condemn me to justify yourself?" (Job 40:8)

User/Seeker Friendly Theology

Discussions of doctrine and theology are not well received. Sentiments like, "I hate doctrine, all it does is divide," emanate from some Southern Baptist pulpits. John Hannah, professor of historical theology at Dallas Theological Seminary, writes, "Theology, once the 'queen' of all the sciences, is rapidly becoming an embarrassing encumbrance."[216] How can Southern Baptists insist on biblical notions of God and the doctrines of grace when each believer and each church, according to their confessions, are autonomous and free to construct their own theology? Hannah terms this "privatization, i.e., truth is only personal and private, not public or universal."[217] "The

[215] Mark Coppenger, "The Ascent of Lost Man in Southern Baptist Preaching," *Founders Journal* 25 (Summer 1996): 9.
[216] John Hannah, "The Denigration of Theology in the Postmodern World," *Reformation and Revival* 11:1 (Winter 2002): 16.
[217] Ibid.

prevailing view of man's prominence in the [Southern Baptist] Convention's history, may have unintentionally laid the theological groundwork for the loss of authentic worship and the true understanding of God's holiness and power."[218]

Hannah notes that the church's emphasis on procedures, emotions, and an acceptance of the premises of modernity leaves it without theological grounding.[219] The Southern Baptist Convention is not an exception to this. Suffering from the hangover of revivalism, soul competency, Landmarkism, and held fast in the grip of individualism, sectarianism, and pragmatism they have lost their grip on their theological heritage. As Timothy George says, "The greatest threats to the Southern Baptist Convention today are complacency and amnesia."[220] They have forgotten the Calvinistic doctrines held by many of their founders and have retreated into Arminianism quite simply because Arminianism builds bigger churches. One of the chief indicators of health in the Southern Baptist mind is denominational statistics and Arminian theology with man making the crucial decisions just builds bigger churches. It sounds better to the modern ear and is more compatible with a denomination whose historic hallmarks include soul competency, a high degree of autonomy, and regeneration founded in a personal decision. Whatever works, the theology of pragmatism, is the theology that seems to carry the day. The correct theology in the mind of many Southern Baptists has to be the theology that builds bigger churches and produces more baptisms (while the problems with baptismal statistics noted above are generally ignored).

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[218] Michael Calvert, "Herschel Hobbs and the Southern Baptist Doctrine of Regeneration: A Response and Critique", Seminar paper, *Reformed Theological Seminary*, March 2000, 21.
[219] Hannah, 16.
[220] Timothy George, "Southern Baptist Ghosts", *First Things* 93 (May 1999): 18.

"If one builds his *theology* . . . upon the presumption of man's ultimate autonomy or 'free will,' then of logical necessity he will be compelled to design his *practice* . . . in the light of pleasing and accommodating men rather than God. Buzz-words such as 'contemporary,' 'seeker-friendly,' high-energy,' 'relevant,' and 'non-traditional' now dominate the landscape . . ."[221] This relevant evangelism runs the gamut from The Judgment House to magic shows and these are always followed by techniques described earlier as manipulative and shallow. This author has witnessed literally hundreds of "decision cards' signed at The Judgment in a matter of days but only a handful are ever discipled or became disciples who produce fruit. This whole exercise leaves the local church glorying in the "revival" that has taken place and the individuals who were "revived" able to point to a specific event that satisfied the "salvific requirement." The theological foundation of evangelism, the doctrines of grace, has been eroded but it was an event (a conversion event) that was user-friendly, fun, high-energy, etc. A certain complacency about a correct understanding of God's grace, held by many Southern Baptist founders, has certainly set in and it is indeed a great danger.

[221] Calvert, 20.

CHAPTER 6

STATISTICS, CALVINISM, AND FOUNDERS

Much has been written concerning the Southern Baptists and their statistics. The numbers are quoted by many as a sign of success. The massive numbers of Southern Baptists and their growth have fostered a sort of ecclesiastical arrogance when compared with other denominations. After all, you can't have over sixteen million members and give over one billion dollars to missions if you're not successful. However, many have turned these statistics upside down and suggested that the vast majority of these members are missing or unregenerate based on their lack of attendance or any visible participation in the life of the church.

Studies show that roughly only one-third of the Convention's members show up each Sunday. The figure drops to only ten percent for Sunday evening worship.[222] Various surveys show little difference in statistics on divorce, abortion, adultery, and illegal drug use between those on the church rolls and those in the world who deny Christ. Tom Ascol says such moral relativism "actually grows out of the shallow evangelism that has filled our church rolls with unconverted members. When unregenerate people find refuge in church membership they inevitably dilute the body's

[222] Jim Elliff, "Southern Baptists, an Unregenerate Denomination," *Christian Communicators Worldwide* 27 October 2003, 2.

corporate commitment to holiness."[223] This is particularly true when they vote in congregational meetings, help structure individual church covenants, and choose and depose pastors, elders, and deacons.

What are the Southern Baptists to do? Should they expunge almost ten million people from the church rolls? Should one's voting rights be based on attendance or age? This is indeed a thorny problem and some voices see nothing but division ahead for the SBC. Many of these problems are not new and many have roots much deeper than the ever-increasingly shallow evangelistic techniques outlined above. Hyper-Calvinism, Landmarkism, revivalism, the Fundamentalist-Modernist debates of the 1920's and 1930's, the battle over inerrancy, and the recent liberal-conservative controversy have all left scars and it is obvious with only a cursory listening that many of the debates which continue are actually founded on these issues that have lain beneath the surface of Southern Baptist life and Southern Baptist success.

The debate over Calvinism is threatening to produce more division along different fault lines but it is not a new debate. It goes back to seventeenth century England. The debate has surfaced at different times. In the early days it was usually a strand of Arminian theology or evangelistic practice that militated against the Calvinism of the key leaders of the Convention. The debate centers on Calvinists, Southern Baptists who are Reformed in their theology, who are trying to recover the historic doctrines of grace. They are a definite minority and will face a major assault by the "conservatives" who have gained control of the Convention. As one leader was quoted as saying, "Now

[223] Thomas Ascol, "Southern Baptists at the Crossroads: Returning to the Old Paths" *Founders Journal* 19/20 (Winter/Spring 1995): 2.

that we've gotten rid of the liberals, we're going after the Calvinists."[224] The question is yet to be answered as to whether a "five-point Calvinist" in the Dortian formulation will be able to have a place in the SBC, a post in an SBC seminary, or convention leadership role.

The Calvinists although under attack refuse to go quietly. Founders Ministries is a group devoted to the recovery of the doctrines of grace in Southern Baptist life. They take as their theological foundation the first Southern Baptist confession of faith *The Abstract of Principles*, which as noted earlier was based on the New Hampshire Confession, the Calvinistic system in a milder from, but a form that is loudly disclaimed by the vast majority of Southern Baptists today. The self-stated desire of the movement is to return to the biblical gospel held by the founders of the SBC. This implies several things. First, the Southern Baptist folk in this movement believe that Southern Baptists once held to the doctrines of grace. Secondly, they hold that *The Abstract of Principles* echoed those doctrines. And finally, they obviously feel that those doctrines are not held by the leadership, or the majority of Southern Baptist churches and members.

Founders.org, *The Founders Journal*, and the various internet postings of Founders Ministries are useful resources concerning Baptist history and current trends. They give no definitive answer, however, as to the reason Southern Baptists departed from the Calvinism of their founders. It may be as Tom Nettles said, "the factors in such a phenomenon are so complex that a thoroughly accurate analysis is not possible."[225] So the approach by the Founders Movement is one of education, an attempt to challenge

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[224] Michael P. Calvert, Pastor Christ Presbyterian Church, PCA, Personal interview, 19 July 2006. (Dr. Calvert is a former professor at Reformed Theological Seminary and a former Southern Baptist pastor.)
[225] Thomas J. Nettles, *By His Grace and for His Glory: A Historical, Theological, and Practical Study of the Doctrines of Grace in Baptist Life* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1986), 244.

Southern Baptists to think theologically and to recognize the history of which they are descendants. This approach attacks the twin errors of complacency and amnesia cited by George.

If the Founders appeal to Scripture, history, and heritage to try and prove their desire for reform within the Southern Baptist Convention, the anti-Calvinists have no problem in going right at the heart of what they believe to be wrong with the Founders' approach. Steve Lemke says, "it is a common *intuition* that those with a theology of hard Calvinism are not apt to be as evangelistic as others."[226] (emphasis added) He cites the Founders Movement as an example and proves his point by outlining:

> Founders Fellowship churches had considerably fewer baptisms, smaller congregations, more declining membership than the average Southern Baptist church . . . not a single one of the 233 self-identified Founders Fellowship Southern Baptist churches had 40 or more baptisms . . . The Southern Baptist churches associated with the Founders Fellowship also tended to be smaller than the average Southern Baptist church. Only eleven of the 233 churches had more than 1,000 members in 2004, and only one had regular worship attendance of 1,000 or more. Over 42 percent of the Founder's Fellowship churches had 100 or fewer members, and over 60 percent had 200 or fewer members . . .The Founder's Fellowship churches were not only smaller, but they were more likely to be plateaued or declining than most Southern Baptist churches.[227]

So the measure of doctrine is not Scripture but success. Clearly Lemke's point is the Founders churches are less evangelistic because of their Calvinistic doctrine. However, it is clear he considers the measure of one's evangelism not to be the gospel one presents, not the doctrines of grace expressed clearly as the founders of the SBC preached, taught, and wrote of them, but rather the number of baptisms, church members,

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[226] Steve Lemke, "The Future of Southern Baptists as Evangelicals," presented at Maintaining Baptist Distinctives Conference, Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary, April 2005, Memphis.
[227] Ibid., 17.

and church growth. This pragmatic end is very measurable and not as nebulous as doctrinal discussions.

Actually, this approach demonstrates more than critics would like. Many have criticized the SBC as unregenerate because of their attendance figures and questionable numbers as noted above. This author undertook some independent analysis of the available data to verify such conclusions. In the years 2003 and 2004 there were 782,440 baptisms in the Southern Baptist Convention. There were 856,706 other additions in that same period. The total membership over that same period, however, rose by only 19,758. (Source: Strategic Planning & Knowledge Management, MSN 118, Lifeway Christian Resources)

Tom Ascol by way of reply to Lemke posted statistics for two large Southern Baptist churches over the period of 2001-2004. The first, a very large church, baptized 3,331 people over the four year period and added 2,720 other members. However, the primary worship attendance over the same period increased by only 133 people. (Ascol does not mention that three years into this four year period the primary worship attendance, after 4,612 additions, had actually declined by 358.) Another church baptized 945 people during the same period and added 784 other members. As a result of 1,729 new members the primary worship attendance declined by 326. Granted that statistics do not tell the whole story but "Southern Baptists simply must be encouraged to face up to the realities behind our sham statistics. Souls are at stake. Real evangelism is at stake. The gospel is at stake."[228]

[228] Tom Ascol, "Annual Church Profiles – Round 2," available from http://www.founders.org/blog/2005/08/annual-church-profiles-round-2.html; Internet; accessed 20 November 2006.

And so the debate goes. The Founders make persuasive theological and historical arguments for their position but pragmatism rules and the SBC pushes on toward their goal of one million baptisms this year. Whatever builds bigger churches, amasses bigger numbers, and brings in more receipts seems to rule the day in the Southern Baptist Convention. Even when the debate is restricted to theological issues, the manner in which certain terms are defined and interpreted leaves both sides apparently agreeing in form but in actuality deeply divided. When you have a system wherein the autonomous individual and autonomous local congregation are made the authority in theological matters, the authority of Scripture becomes somewhat secondary. Those who fought so hard for inerrancy and supremacy of Scripture have in the end sacrificed what was fought for to that overriding Baptist principle – freedom. Bill Leonard says, "Denominational leaders warned their constituents that only through uncompromising loyalty to convention programs and policies could they be certain that Baptist doctrines and New Testament Christianity would be preserved. These same leaders also learned which doctrines would rally the troops and which when defined too precisely would fragment them . . . which ones required a certain theological ambiguity for the sake of denominational loyalty."[229] It is unlikely in such a climate that theological discussions carried on through speeches, journals, and internet blogs will convince many that the Southern Baptists have departed from the historic faith of the founders or that said faith was Calvinistic in character.

[229] Bill J. Leonard, *God's Last and Only Hope: The Fragmentation of the Southern Baptist Convention* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1990), 101.

CHAPTER 7

REFLECTIONS AND CONCLUSION

Although the complexity of this issue is as wide and as deep as Nettles has suggested, there are certain facts within the Southern Baptists' move away from Calvinism that can be demonstrated. From the time of Smyth and Helwys, it is safe to conclude there has not been one single confession or system of doctrine that has regulated Baptist life. It is clear, however, that the founders and early leaders of the Southern Baptist Convention were thoroughly Calvinistic. After 1845 it was little more than a generation later that Arminian tendencies began to be widespread in Southern Baptist theology and practice. Around one hundred fifty years later the Southern Baptist Convention is dominated by anti-Calvinistic rhetoric, doctrine, and practice, many examples of which have been cited. The reformed theologians, pastors, and leaders who embrace all points of the Dortian formulation of Calvinism are a small minority.

What produced this sea-change in little more than one century? Furthermore, what was the point? Many obviously "became convinced" as Smyth did that traditional reformed theology as we have defined it here was incorrect, or as Nettles reports the demeaning language used, "diabolical, hell-conceived, heretical, and destructive."[230] What convinced them? Was this conviction drawn from a careful study of Scripture, a

[230] Thomas J. Nettles, *By His Grace and for His Glory: A Historical, Theological, and Practical Study of the Doctrines of Grace in Baptist Life* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1986), 244.

real discussion of the theological issues, or was it measured as in the Toy case by "whether or not they were out of step with the average Baptist."[231]

The position throughout this paper has been to illustrate that it is being in "step with the average Baptist" which determines theology not Scripture. This is not true of all Southern Baptists and many have been quoted who are reformed in their theology and deeply concerned about the state of affairs within the Southern Baptist Convention, but from surveys, to practice, to statements of the acknowledged leaders of the denomination there is an anti-Calvinistic bias that far overshadows the efforts of those who would return the Southern Baptist Convention to its historic theological roots.

Many factors have been presented that shaped this general consensus. Sectarianism, freedom, pragmatism, soul competency, revivalism, ecclesiology, an aversion to creeds, individualism, inerrancy, the Fundamentalist-Modernist debate, and even southern culture and economics had a hand in shaping the predominant theology among Southern Baptists. The idea that Fisher Humphreys set forth that "much of [the Baptists'] energy in the seventeenth century was devoted to defending believer's baptism, Baptist sectarianism, and religious freedom"[232] could be said of Southern Baptists for most if not all of the factors listed above. As Timothy George said, "denominational pragmatism became the infallible rule of Baptist life."[233] The distinctive ideas represented by each of the various topics examined were justified in Southern Baptist life by results.

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[231] Phyllis R. Tippit and W. H. Bellinger, Jr. "Repeating History: The Story of C. H. Toy," *Baptist History and Heritage* 38:1 (Winter 2003): 26.
[232]Fisher Humphreys, "Baptists and Their Theology," *Baptist History and Heritage* 35 (Winter 2000): 11.
[233] Timothy George, "Whence and Whither?" *Founders Journal* 19/20 (Winter/Spring 1995): 26.

There has been significant discussion about baptism in a paper that does not address the issue. However, the point herein, as was stated, was not to enter into that debate but rather to show that even this, the most baptistic of Baptist distinctives has fallen victim to many of the same factors that have altered or weakened the historic theological perspectives of the Southern Baptists. In fact the *sine qua non's* of a true church as most Southern Baptists would articulate them, believer's baptism and a regenerate membership, are called into question much more by Southern Baptist's practice than ever by their hermeneutics. While one should respectfully debate the theological positions of others (what got Luther into trouble), it is a different matter when practice represents a danger to others, particularly when souls are at stake as many respected Southern Baptists have attested (Luther's motivation behind the theological debate he sought).

When one's practice betrays a different practical theology from one's stated theological positions the real convictions behind those convictions must honestly be questioned. This difference in theology and practice has been traced throughout to a view as to what was expedient. *The Baptist Faith and Message* says, "Baptists should hold themselves free to revise their statements of faith as may seem to them wise and *expedient* at any time." The problem with expediency however was articulated by Maring and Hudson: "when expediency becomes the primary consideration in determining form and program, the essential character of the church may be obscured."[234] From what has been outlined herein it is fairly obvious that when reformed doctrine, as quantified by the five point formulation of Dort, came into conflict with Southern Baptist

[234] Norman H. Maring and Winthrop S. Hudson, *A Baptist Manual of Polity and Practice* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1963), 17.

agendas it was expedient to move away from the reformed faith. A "softer baptistic Calvinism" with a redefinition of terms and words would handle it all. As Bill Leonard said, *The Baptist Faith and Message* was crafted in such a way that a variety of congregations with diverse theological traditions could believe that their way "was the Baptist way."

This religious freedom born of a time roughly coinciding with the founding of the American democratic government has a strong and universal appeal among Baptists. The freedom and competency of each individual naturally flows into an ecclesiological structure based on the same freedom and competency. The missionary work and evangelism that flowed from such a doctrine of the church and the individual would have had a natural appeal to the rugged individuals of the frontier, where not surprisingly the Southern Baptists emerged and grew. If no authority can trump the individual what system of doctrine can you have? Southern Baptists would say that the plain teaching of Scripture would dictate your theology and that plain teaching would be recognized by all. The facts testify otherwise. There is a wide diversity of opinions, all drawn supposedly from the Bible, on almost every conceivable topic from drinking alcohol, to baptism, to "once saved always saved." The inerrancy of Scripture, the point on which more Southern Baptists could be said to agree than any other, while not suffering so much from diversity of opinion is, none the less, diminished by the individual autonomy to which they hold so tenaciously.

The Southern Baptists focus on distinctives such as autonomy of the believer, the autonomy of the local church, separation of church and state, fierce independence, even believer's baptism as some have come to practice it. Southern Baptist theology

becomes as Timothy George said, "a litany of negative constraints rather than the positive exposition of an essential doctrinal core. For some Baptists these so-called distinctives, often interpreted in an attenuated, reductionistic form became the essence of the Baptist tradition itself."[235] The defense of these distinctives requires much time and energy. It is more expedient to abandon traditional Calvinistic theology than spend time defining and refining an essential doctrinal core.

It is here that we begin to see the point (purpose) of the Southern Baptist departure from the doctrines of Calvinism, the theology of the vast majority of their founders. The resistance to theological consistency in favor of pragmatic efficiency is the story of the Southern Baptists over the last century. Even the most distinctive of all Baptist doctrines, the baptism of believers only, has fallen to this desire for lightly held doctrine and demonstrable success. The "management" of the church determines the formulation of theology, not scriptural truth. The proof lies in the number of baptisms, the members on the roll, and the receipts. The proof of correct doctrine is quite pragmatically in the numbers.

This may be one of the key reasons Calvinism is increasingly rejected. It is seen as narrow and restrictive and those Southern Baptist churches that hold to, or more appropriately try to reclaim, that doctrine are smaller and grow slower if at all, so the proof is once again in the numbers. Jesus' warnings about the broad way and the narrow, the many and the few are ignored.

The reason for this lies even deeper. There is a need for assurance. When one's doctrine of baptism and ecclesiology, and aversion to the creeds of Christendom, and methods of evangelism are so different from much of the Church there is a need to feel

[235] George, "Whence and Whither," 25.

vindicated, to have some assurance that one's *distinctiveness* is rooted in truth and not in heresy. The privatization of truth requires some justification. Each individual makes choices in their daily lives and the success, the results, the joy, etc. which result are generally regarded as the fruit or proof of a correct choice. When theology and church polity all function as the result of autonomous choices it is only natural to regard the success that follows as "proof" of correct doctrine and practice. Lack of success is likewise counted a testimony of incorrect doctrine and it becomes expedient to change, modify, or soften it. As George said the way many look to "success in the church is to define the smallest number of doctrines possible."[236] Less definition leaves said doctrines more accommodating and makes it possible to equate "successes" with correct doctrines, regardless of the source of those successes.

It is this self-congratulatory sense of accomplishment that lies behind the aversion to creeds and doctrine by many within the SBC. Rigid doctrinal formulations and creeds and confessions that systematically express such are not the problem in and of themselves. The old Baptist fear that these will take the place of Scripture is unfounded because such historic formulations, creeds, and confessions take the Bible as their source and, indeed, most modern renderings come complete with copious footnotes for virtually every phrase, many times for every word of some phrases. No, the real fear is that that great Baptist distinctive – freedom – will somehow be compromised by doctrinal standards that are too rigid. If nothing else is clear from what has preceded it should be crystal clear that freedom reigns supreme in Southern Baptist theology. From citations from Herschel Hobbs and Nelson Price in the introduction, to Smyth, to the revivals of the awakenings, to *The Baptist Faith and Message* one thing is abundantly clear – man's

[236] Timothy George, "The Subtle Lure of Liberalism," *Founders Journal* 9 (Summer 1992): 18.

freedom trumps God's sovereign purpose in election, trumps any form of ecclesiastical rule, trumps even the clear exegesis of Scripture which is the touchstone of Baptist belief.

This is the purpose in distancing themselves from the Calvinism of their founders – the so called "five point" Calvinism. Where is the sense of accomplishment, justification, or assurance if God has foreordained all this and brought it to pass without our help or cooperation? Likewise the fear of lethargic evangelism, a fear that was well-founded in some places in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, can only be avoided by adopting a soteriology that places man in the ultimate position of decision-maker. Evangelistic and missionary efforts seem pointless if God has already decided the outcome. Indeed Calvin himself anticipated such objections and wrote:

> But if it is plainly owing to the mere pleasure of God [and not our efforts] that salvation is spontaneously offered to some, while others have no access to it, great and difficult questions immediately arise, questions which are inexplicable, *when just views are not entertained concerning election and predestination*. To many this seems a perplexing subject, because they deem it most incongruous that of the great body of mankind some should be predestined to salvation and others to destruction . . . It is plain how greatly ignorance of this principle detracts from the glory of God and impairs true humility.[237] (emphasis added)

The various examples cited throughout this paper exemplify those two problems. The glory of God is compromised by being subject to the will of man as the final arbiter of salvation. The exaltation of man to this lofty position certainly impairs any exercise of humility but the "numbers" seem to testify to the correctness of the approach and thus a sort of ecclesiastical arrogance insinuates itself as justification for a theological position, a position founded in the theology of pragmatism. Cultural

[237] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1997), 202-203.

pressures and personal tastes rule. Emotional appeals on pragmatic grounds rather than a consistent theology often carry the day.

All of this is decidedly out of step with four of the five points of the Dortian formulation. What is interesting is that the fifth point, the perseverance of the saints, as baptized with the catch phrase "once saved, always saved" addresses on a personal level what statistics address on a denominational level – assurance. As Leonard said on a personal level the equation of this slogan with perseverance is a near fatal mistake. The idea of getting an event right that satisfies a salvific requirement becomes the goal rather than an experience of God's great grace. This desire to be "in," to have the assurance of knowing you have it right is the undercurrent individually and corporately. It is this desire for assurance, what could be called vindication or justification when one sees himself out of step with much of Christendom historically and theologically, that drives separation from the historic doctrines of grace. Landmarkism which is an embarrassment of sorts to many Southern Baptists today was founded on such assurance, an assurance that went all the way to arrogance – we have it right and everyone else has it wrong. This is what C.S. Lewis called "chronological bigotry," i.e., the very idea that you or your group are the only ones to have recognized a particular truth throughout the history of Christendom and have understood it better than anyone else. This smacks of the arrogance that springs from faulty assurance.

It was necessary for Southern Baptists to leave behind the doctrines of Calvinism to make this happen. The various factors examined in this paper all contributed to this in varying degrees and differently with different segments of the SBC at different times. However, what is clear is the conflict between the personal and

corporate autonomy and the doctrines of grace. The position of the founders of the SBC was that God's grace was not merely prevenient grace, but the doctrine which built the SBC into the denominational juggernaut we see today is a view of man as autonomous and able to choose or reject the grace of God. This is and was the purpose of the move away from Calvinism. From the wording of *The Baptist Faith and Message* to choice of doctrinal and life issues around which to rally the troops the SBC and its leaders have centered their doctrine on autonomy and freedom, to broadly classify the issues examined herein. The problem with this as David Wells expresses it is, "people who 'remain in the center of their lives and loyalties [doctrinal or denominational], autonomous architects of their own futures,' thereby avoid coming face to face with God and his truth. They need face only themselves."[238]

Tom Nettles also comments, "Reformation of Baptist identity [the identity of the founders of the SBC] will be unretrieved to the degree that a grace-centered theology remains unrecovered. If the work of salvation hangs on human will, then so must the work of revelation and inspiration. The vital organ of inerrancy can not survive in the absence of the nutrition of grace."[239] As was mentioned above and illustrated by views on baptism, even the distinctives and doctrines for which Southern Baptists have fought so hard collapse under the weight of autonomy and freedom. It was the desire to preserve these ideas, ideas designed not from Scripture but ideas born of independence, freedom, and separation from the doctrines of the past that caused Southern Baptists to depart from the doctrines of Calvinism. The desire to act on one's own impulses and to receive assurance that those impulses meet the salvific requirement lay behind the dangerous

[238] David F. Wells, *God in the Wasteland*: *The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1994), 53.
[239] Thomas J. Nettles, "Ready for Reformation?" *Founders Journal* 44 (Spring 2001), 6.

mixture of Calvinism and Arminianism that has pervaded Southern Baptist life and practice.

To return to the introduction with a final example of the mixture and confusion that this desire for autonomy created, consider the following words of the Spanish Jesuit Luis de Molina and James Arminius beside the words of Herschel Hobbs and Nelson Price in the introduction. "We are free when we can, in the face of external causes, either act or not act. Therefore, if human beings are to have any freedom in matters of salvation, then, God having done all that God is going to do, the human choice to accept or reject must remain genuinely open: 'It is possible that of two who are given equal internal help from God, one is by his free will converted, and the other remains in unfaithfulness.'"[240] Thus human freedom is the final arbiter of salvation. It is the will of man that turns sufficient grace into saving grace. "Grace is present with all men, by which their free will may be actually bent to good; but . . . there is in all men such a will as is flexible to either side upon accession of grace."[241] Jumble up the quotes; mix up the authors and who could tell the difference. From the Council of Trent, to an English separatist turned Mennonite, to a modern day Southern Baptist pastor of one of the largest churches in the SBC, who can tell the difference? In fact if Molina would have abandoned paedobaptism Graves would have undoubtedly included him in the line of Baptist succession. This is the way this process has gone over time and how it has been reflected in Southern Baptist life particularly in the last century – say the correct word but hold the doctrine so lightly, or redefined in such a way that there is room for all kinds of

[240] William C. Placher, *The Domestication of Transcendence: How Modern Thinking about God Went Wrong* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 149.
[241] Ibid., 153.

freedom of interpretation. This will promote church growth like nothing else and the results will prove the correctness of the doctrine, whatever it might be.

This is the point of the departure, the origin of the expediency to move away from Calvinism. It was not by debate or church councils or special commissions that such a shift occurred. It was to achieve the purpose of vindicating Baptist distinctives, church growth, evangelism based on the primacy of the human will, and a denominational structure loose enough to accommodate all who want to call themselves Southern Baptists. The purpose was the point of departure. To be sure, a debate has been joined in recent years with the Calvinists pushing for a return of the denomination to the doctrines of grace, to Calvinism. They argue on historical and theological grounds, but this leaves the purpose of the departure as stated herein unaddressed. As has been presented here this purpose now goes beyond Calvinism and is beginning to strike at the very core of Southern Baptist identity – baptism and inerrancy. The accommodation necessary to achieve the various purposes above, the lightly held doctrines necessary to make this acceptable to all, eventually strikes at the very heart of what it means to be a Southern Baptist. Those within the SBC who would address the deviation from their historical and theological roots should not address just history and theology but should address the real point of departure which impacted and continues to impact theology and practice.

A return to the Calvinism of the founders is in and of itself not the answer. Even if a confession emerged from the SBC which was thoroughly Calvinistic in every "point" that would not be the answer. It would not be the answer because such was the confession of the vast majority of the Southern Baptist leaders, preachers, and educators

at one time but this theology has fallen to the various factors outlined herein. These issues lie actively churning beneath the surface of Southern Baptist life and practice and even a new Calvinistic confession issued from the floor of the convention would meet the same dilution and denigration of the Calvinism of the founders because these issues that were the original point of departure remain unaddressed.

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